



# THE ROMANCE OF THE ENGLISH THEATRE

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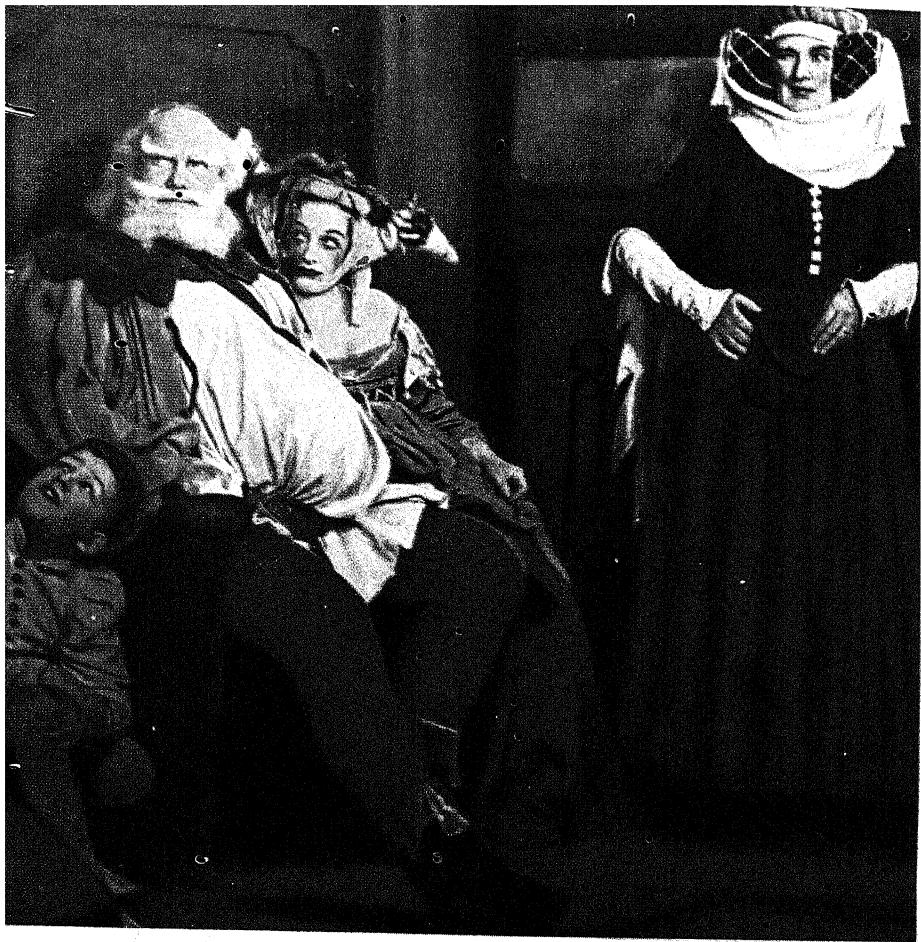
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I RALPH RICHARDSON as Sir John Falstaff, JOYCE REDMAN as Doll Tearsheet and SYBIL THORNDIKE as Mistress Quickly in the Old Vic Theatre Company's *Henry IV, Part II*, New Theatre, 1945

# THE ROMANCE OF THE ENGLISH THEATRE

*by*  
DONALD BROOK



SALISBURY SQUARE LONDON

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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THIS is a book for the "ordinary" playgoer who is sufficiently interested in drama to be misidful of its past and careful for its future. It tells the story of the English theatre in a way which, I hope, will interest and help the many thousands who can see in the renascence of our national culture a means of ensuring the happiness, enlightenment and general well-being of our people.

Owing to the very high cost of paper and printing at the present time, I have been compelled to condense what would normally have been a book of at least five hundred pages into a volume of barely two hundred pages of text, and although I hope that the illustrations in this book will to some extent compensate for its brevity, I beg the reader's indulgence if my efforts to summarize have overloaded the story with bare facts.

Finally, may I thank all those who have so kindly assisted me in obtaining information and illustrations, in particular Miss Frances Stephens, editor of *Theatre World*; who kindly collaborated with me in the writing of the last five chapters.

DONALD BROOK

London,

March, 1952.

# Chapter I

## EARLY DRAMA

TO trace the origins of drama we should have to go back far into the ancient histories of Egypt, China, Greece and Rome, and even then it would be impossible to discover precisely when people began to express their emotions by acting. We may safely assume, however, that drama evolved from the primitive dancing and music that characterized the early forms of worship.

Until the twelfth century, there was little that could be called drama in England; but in those early days the folk festivals, which were responsible for the earliest forms of folk-drama, were developing rapidly. More and more dramatic action was put into the tremendously popular sword and Morris dances; more music and songs were added, until finally, with the introduction of dialogue, there emerged what was generally known as the Mummers' Play. This is really the foundation of English drama.

It seems that the Mummers did not always perform plays. They were little bands of men (and occasionally women) who ensured that their villages took part in the general gaiety of the traditional festivals by dressing up in fantastic clothes and going about indulging in varying degrees of tomfoolery. Some historians insist that women were never allowed to act as Mummers, but there is little evidence to prove this, although there is no doubt that any women who were permitted to take part were kept very much in the background.

In all parts of the country there was great enthusiasm for the Mummers' Play. The principals were St. George, Captain Slasher, the Doctor and the Turkish Knight, but they had a "full supporting cast" of plenty of minor characters! The play itself varied considerably according to local taste and ingenuity, but the fact that one of the participants was invariably slain and then miraculously restored to life by the Doctor, suggests that the universal theme was the celebration of the death of the old year and the idea of resurrection associated with the coming of the new.

The lord of the manor frequently took a keen interest in the local Mummers' Play, and it was a common occurrence to find the village folk being invited to perform in the hall of the manor house. One can well imagine this typically English scene. On May Day, at harvest time, or on Christmas Eve, the lord of the manor with his family and friends would form the nucleus of an audience at one end of the hall, and the Mummers with blackened faces or wearing masks would perform at the other. At the end of the play the performers would take a collection to defray the cost of making their costumes, and then the lord of the manor would provide refreshments liberally for everybody.

Now let us see what other forms of drama there were in mediæval times. So few of the people could read the bible that the clergy would often act plays in the churches to bring home to their congregations the stories from the scriptures. These Mystery and Miracle plays had a most important effect upon the growth of drama in England, though they lacked the force and national character of the Mummers' Play.

Miracle plays generally depicted incidents in the lives of the saints and martyrs, and Mystery plays dealt more with the story of man's fall and redemption. Such cities as York, Coventry, Wakefield and Chester were famous for them, and in London they were a regular occurrence at Clerkenwell and Skinner's Well.

On much the same lines were the Morality plays, which were intended to illustrate the conflict between good and evil in the life of man, but in these the characters were abstract: they were personifications of vice, folly, chastity, wisdom, and so forth. The play called *Everyman* is an excellent example.

Performed originally in Latin by the priests and choir-boys, the Miracle and Mystery plays gradually gave way to the Morality plays, and became more secularized. More and more of the laity took part in them, the English language was adopted, and they became more entertaining than uplifting. In time, the religious element became decidedly threadbare, and the perfectly natural desire of the people to be amused led to a great deal of profanity, which, of course, horrified the clergy, who subsequently dropped out of the picture altogether. By this time, the plays had already grown so elaborate and irreligious that they had been moved out of the churches, and were being performed on stages erected in the open and visible from all sides.

Historical matter—often of an entirely irrelevant nature—found its way into many of these plays, and became so popular

that it tended to transform them into dramas of history or fable. This explains the fact that when in the sixteenth century men began seriously to write drama, they generally turned to history for their plots or themes. Even the early dramatists were careful to give the people what they wanted !

### THE FIRST PROFESSIONALS

By this time, the professional actor had already come into being. As the plays moved into the sphere of pure entertainment, experienced men with a flair for acting would visit the villages and towns in their vicinity and offer their services in return for payment. To what extent this was done is not at all certain—they were rarely employed in the Mummers' plays, which were invariably performed by the villagers themselves—but very often these "professionals" would find that they could make a livelihood by going around from town to town and would naturally prefer to do so rather than to toil upon the land.

We have to go but one stage further to see how the first troupes of actors were formed. The odd "professional" actor soon met others in the course of his work, particularly if he frequented the larger towns, and found that it paid him better to join a little company of actors that could perform without bothering with amateurs. All over the country these little troupes were forming in the sixteenth century. Generally they consisted of four, five or six men and a boy, the latter being compelled to play the feminine parts. Some of the men were quite intelligent individuals; men who had been minstrels or entertainers in the houses of the wealthy, but it was not at all uncommon to find with them persons of the very lowest type—vagabonds who had been taken up when the little band was deficient in number.

These troupes played in the residences of the nobility, on village greens, or wherever an audience could be found. A favourite spot was the yard of the old galleried inn, not because of the proximity of stimulating refreshment, but because these taverns were like ready-made amphitheatres. Apart from the fact that a good audience was always assured, wealthy individuals and persons of high rank were frequently to be found there, and as we shall see in a moment, the players had a good reason for ingratiating themselves with the nobility.

The troupes paid very little, if anything, to the landlord for the use of his yard. In most cases he was a genial soul, fond of amusement and quite willing to allow the players to add to the amenities

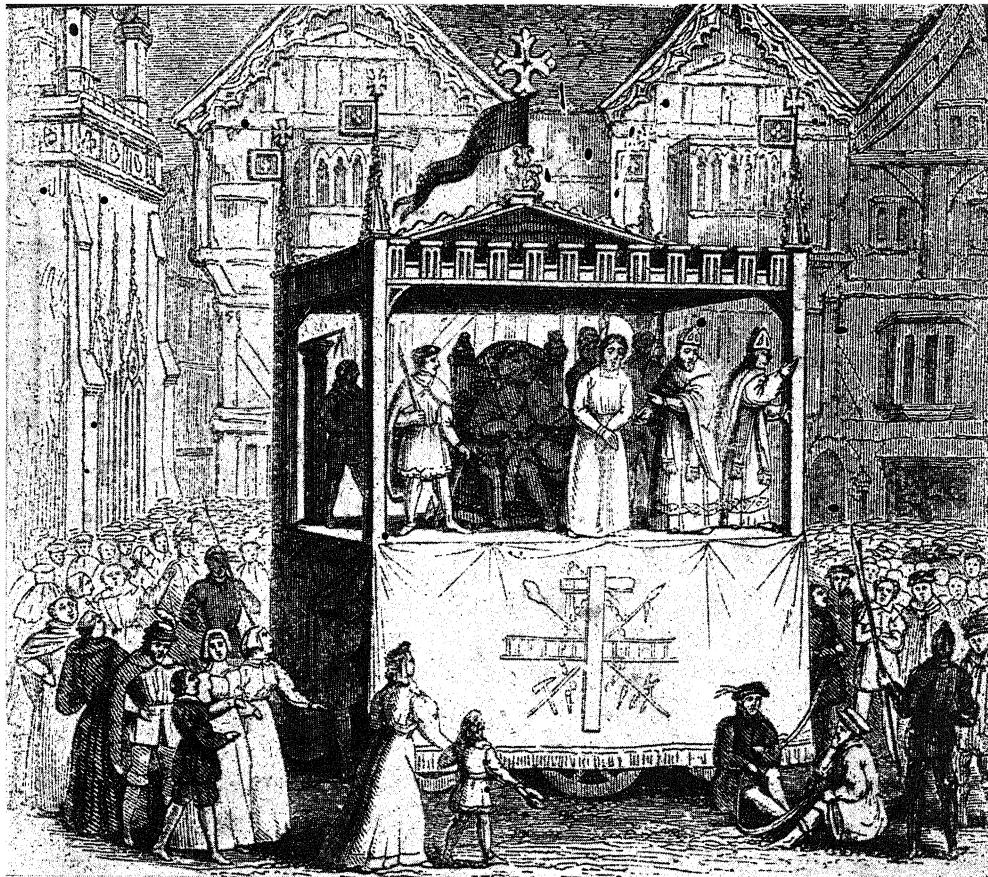
of his house. Their chief difficulty was in the collection of money, because most people regarded the inn-yard as a public place, and were not always very polite when the players demanded a penny or two for services rendered. It was rarely possible to charge for admission to the yard: the players had to be content to scramble round after the performance collecting up money wherever they could.

In London, the Cross Keys in Gracechurch Street, La Belle Sauvage on Ludgate Hill, the Bull in Bishopsgate Street, the Boar's Head in Eastcheap and the famous old Tabard Inn at Southwark were regularly used by troupes of actors. A perfect specimen of the galleried inn beloved by the players is the New Inn at Gloucester. Here you can still see and walk around the splendid galleries where the well-to-do patrons of the hostelry sat and watched the players in the yard below.

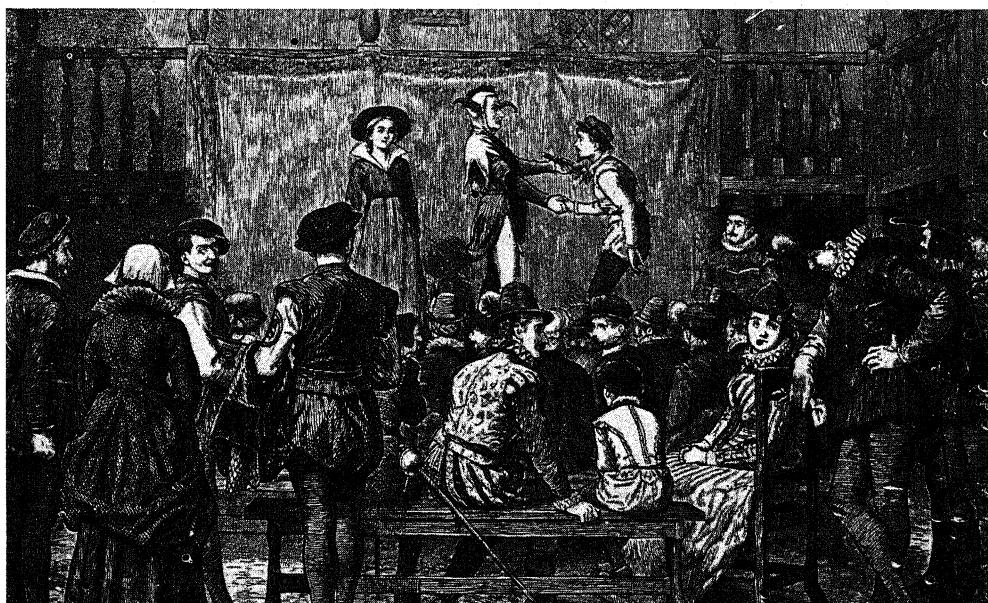
At inns of this type, the poorer folk would gather in the yard at the opposite end to the actors and stand while the play was in progress. Unfortunately there is evidence that "the pit" would sometimes get very rowdy, but this can be readily understood when one considers that the ale was very much stronger than it is to-day. The Puritans, of course, looked upon these dramatic performances with horror, for after the play the landlord would often entertain liberally, and the merry-making was apt to become riotous before the end of the evening.

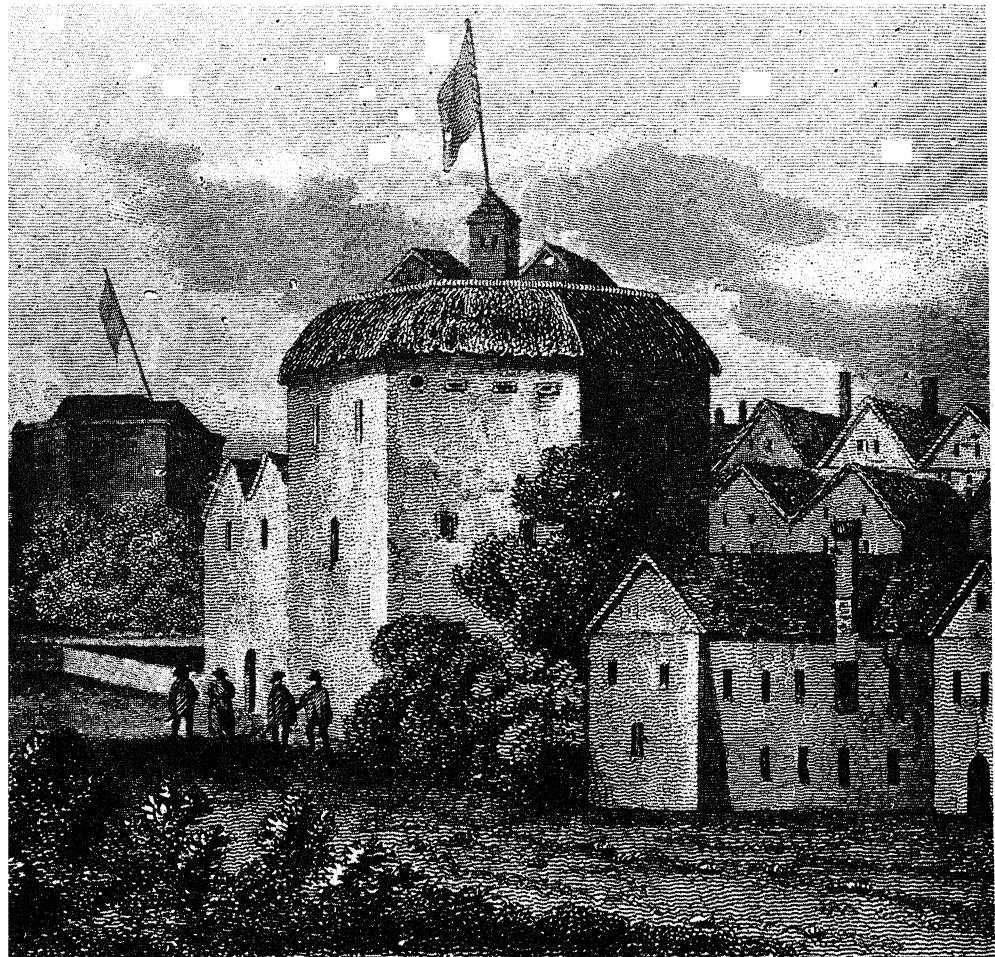
It must not be imagined that these troupes had an easy life, in fact, the laws of vagrancy and the precariousness of their livelihood made most of them seek the protection and continual support of rich and powerful patrons. Many of the noblemen at that time assisted by engaging them as members of their permanent household staffs, giving food and clothing in return for entertainment at banquets. When they were not required by their patron, the players were permitted to entertain in the villages for the benefit of the tenants of the estates, and to visit neighbouring towns.

In 1572 this system of patronage was officially approved and made compulsory, for a statute was introduced compelling all troupes to obtain a licence from a nobleman. Thus they became known by the name of their licensor: "The Earl of Leicester's Men," "The Lord Admiral's Servants," and so forth. As we shall see later, some of the companies became highly skilled in dramatic art, and it was quite a common occurrence for them to visit the large cities to perform in the Guildhall at the invitation

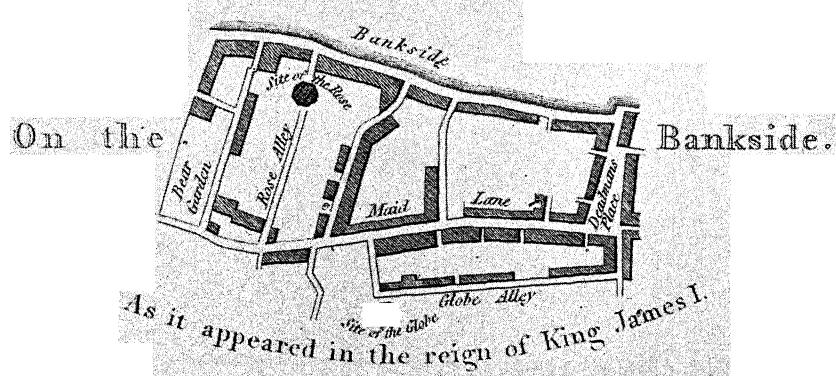


1. Performance of a Mystery Play at Coventry  
2. A Play in an Inn-yard in Elizabethan times





### THE GLOBE THEATRE,



3. The second Globe Theatre (from an engraved view of London, circa 1612)

of the Mayor. On such occasions as this they were generally paid from the Corporation funds.

### COURT PERFORMANCES

There remain two other factors to be considered before we conclude this opening chapter. First, the influence of the court. By this time, various forms of entertainment, including masques and pageants, had become extremely fashionable with royalty. Before Queen Elizabeth I came to the throne there was in office a Master of the Revels who was responsible for such festivities. He was in charge of all the arrangements, costumes, materials, etc., and generally employed a small band of tailors, painters, weavers, haberdashers and carpenters. It is recorded that he was expected to be competent in "skill of devise, in understandinge of historyes, in iudgement of comedyes, tragedyes and shewes, in sight of perspective and architecture," and to have "some smacke of geometrye and other thynges."

From the middle of the sixteenth century onwards, plays were far more popular at court than the traditional masques, until James I revived the latter on astonishingly elaborate lines. The Queen's preference for the plays is important, because had it not been for this royal interest, drama might have been stamped out by the Puritans just as it was approaching its most glorious years. Moreover it brought the players more into touch with court life, because whereas the ladies and gentlemen of the court had been accustomed to appear in the masques and pageants, the tendency was for the plays to be performed exclusively by professional actors.

### DRAMA IN THE SCHOOLS

The schools and colleges were also making an important contribution to the development of dramatic art. At Eton and Westminster, classical plays were encouraged, and the boys of St. Paul's School had the honour of performing plays of Plautus and Terence, the great Roman dramatists, before Cardinal Wolsey. During the sixteenth century, dramatic activity spread throughout our educational establishments, in fact it was Nicholas Udall [1506-1556], headmaster first of Eton and then of Westminster, who wrote the first complete English comedy divided into acts on classical lines—*Ralph Roister Doister*.

## Chapter II

### THE FIRST THEATRES

DURING the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, London expanded rapidly, and with the exception of the Puritans, its prosperous citizens became ardent lovers of sport and amusement. Even those who were not particularly prosperous became infected with the love of entertainment. Observing this, James Burbage, a carpenter who had become an actor and joined the "Earl of Leicester's Men," decided to build a public playhouse near the capital. It had to be *near*, and not *in* London because the Mayor and many of the city fathers were Puritans of a most vinegary variety, and made it quite clear what would happen if he dared to erect his temple of iniquity within the city boundaries.

So Burbage found a site between Shoreditch and Finsbury Fields, just outside the jurisdiction of the Mayor, and in 1576 erected a circular wooden structure at a cost of between six and seven hundred pounds. He called it simply The Theatre. It was supposed to have accommodated over a thousand people, but this, I think, is rather doubtful. Having played in many of the inn-yards, Burbage naturally built his theatre on much the same lines as the galleried inn, except that he made it circular instead of rectangular. Little is known of its structural details except that it had galleries around the yard (the pit) and that this was open to the sky. The stage had a balcony at the rear, beneath which a curtain was hung to form a small inner stage, and on either side of this there was probably a "tiring house" in which costumes and properties, such as they had, were kept.

However primitive it was, The Theatre served its purpose very well, for drama thrived in it for over twenty years, and it was only when a quarrel arose concerning its lease that Burbage's two sons pulled it down and used its timber to build The Globe, of which we shall hear more later.

It was to The Theatre that William Shakespeare came when in 1590, or thereabouts, he first appeared in London; and it is highly probable that on its stage were performed *The Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Romeo*

*and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Richard II*, *King John*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Henry IV*. The leading actors in the company were Richard Burbage—son of James Burbage, Henry Condell and John Heminge. Augustine Phillips was the clown. It was Condell and Heminge who after Shakespeare's death undertook the publication of the first printed collection of his plays.

The year 1576 is also significant because it saw the establishment of the first Blackfriars Theatre: a small "private" playhouse adapted from six upper rooms by Richard Farrant for the use of certain of the Children of the Chapel, Windsor, who were child actors connected with the court. The so-called "private" theatres of the Shakespearean period were smaller theatres to which the more aristocratic playgoers resorted. They were little more than large halls with a stage at one end, though they probably had galleries of some sort.

No sooner had Burbage opened The Theatre than another was built in Moorfields on a piece of land called Curtayne Close. This was called The Curtain, after the name of its site, and not because its builder had a theatrical curtain in mind. It was run by Henry Laneman, who apparently sought an alliance with Burbage against the animosity of the Puritans.

In the following year, the bigoted John Northbrooke published a pamphlet called *A Treatise against Dicing, Dancing, Plays and Interludes* in which he declared that: ". . . Satan hath not a more speedie way and fitter schoole to work and teach his desire, to bring men and women into his snare of concupiscence and filthie lustes of wicked whoredom, than those places, plays and theatres are; and therefore necessary that those places and players shoulde be forbidden, and dissolved, and put down by authoritie, as the brothell houses and stewes are . . ." This had very little effect, and even when some twenty years later the Lord Mayor succeeded in persuading the Queen to suppress the playhouses, the order was never carried out. It ran: "Her Majestie being informed that there are verie greate disorders committed at the common playhouses both by lewd matters that are handled on the stages, and by resorte and confluence of bad people, hath given direction that not onlie no playes be used within London or about the City, or in any other publick place, during this tyme of sommer, but that also those playhouses that are erected and built onlie for suche purposes shall be plucked downe, namelie the Curtayne and the Theatre nere to Shoreditch. . . ."

Nevertheless, the playhouses remained and prospered. The Rose was built on the Bankside in 1591 or thereabouts, and used first by "Lord Strange's Men." It was circular and had a thatched roof to its galleries, but the pit was roofless.

Larger than any before it was The Swan, a twelve-sided theatre erected in 1594. According to some historians, it was not very suitable for dramatic productions, and it was frequently used for other purposes: exhibitions and cruel sports. After 1621 it was used only for prize-fighting.

In 1598 Burbage's two sons pulled down The Theatre and took its great oak timbers to Bankside, where they made their builder erect The Globe, the most famous theatre of its time. The work was finished in the following year, and it was opened with a performance of *King Henry V*. It was for this theatre and "The Lord Chamberlain's Men" that Shakespeare wrote his most famous plays. It was almost certainly circular in shape, for in the prologue to *King Henry V* we find:

" . . . . Can this cockpit hold  
The vasty fields of France, or may we cram  
Within this wooden O, the very casques  
That did affright the air at Agincourt ? "

Its galleries, like those of The Rose, had thatched roofs, but from all accounts it seems to have been a somewhat utilitarian structure with a bare wooden platform—"this unworthy scaffold" as Shakespeare called it. For all that, Shakespeare was very attached to this theatre. The years 1599 to 1613 were its most glorious. Here, Richard Burbage played the principal rôles in the first performances of *Julius Cæsar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Timon of Athens*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, not to mention the plays of Ben Jonson and the other great writers of the day.

On 29th June, 1613, a rather lavish performance of *King Henry VIII* was being staged at The Globe. When in Act I scene iv the King arrived as one of a company of masquers at the house of Cardinal Wolsey, a volley of shots was fired. Alas! the wad of one hit the thatched roof and in a few moments the whole theatre was ablaze. All the audience, it is said, escaped unhurt, though one gentleman had his breeches set on fire and had to be extinguished with a bottle of ale.

The Puritans immediately went about saying that this fire was God's judgement on the theatre, and there appeared a sonnet

about the "dolefull tragedie". However, a new Globe theatre was erected within a year, a more substantial structure, octagonal, and with a tiled roof. But it began to decline in 1635 and was pulled down by the Puritans nine years later [April 15th, 1644].

The Hope, another octagonal theatre, was built in 1614, on much the same design as The Swan. It had brick foundations, a tiled roof, external staircases to the galleries and a moveable stage. One of its special features was its exceptional comfort in the more expensive parts: there were boxes "convenient and suitable for gentlemen to sit in". Its company was "The Lady Elizabeth's Servants", the leading actor being Nathaniel Field, who had previously found fame as a child actor. This theatre was later used for prize-fights and bull-baiting.

More elaborate still was The Fortune, a square theatre built north of the Thames, near Golden Lane in the parish of St. Giles, in 1600. It had brick foundations and wooden framework. There were "gentlemen's rooms" and "twopenny rooms" with ceilings, and its interior was handsomely plastered. It boasted a stage forty-three feet wide extending into the middle of the pit. This theatre opened in 1601 with a performance by "The Lord Admiral's Men," who afterwards became "The Prince's Men". Twenty years afterwards it was destroyed by fire: everything was lost, including all the costumes and "play-books", but a new building, circular and constructed of brick, was built within two years.

Nobody seems to know exactly when The Red Bull theatre in Clerkenwell was erected, but it probably occupied the site of an inn of the same name. It was used by "The Queen's Men," but in its later years it seems to have catered for a very vulgar type of audience. Curiously enough, it survived the Civil War and the Commonwealth, and even when Cromwell prohibited all plays, it was used occasionally for secret performances. At the Restoration, it was the first theatre to re-open, but its company was very poor. We know this because Samuel Pepys visited it on March 23, 1661, and afterwards wrote: "To the Red Bull, where I had not been since plays come up again . . . into the pitt, where I think there was not above ten more than myself, and not one hundred in the whole house. And the play, which is called *All's Lost by Lust*, poorly done; and with so much disorder, among others, in the musique room, the boy that was to sing a song, not singing it right, his master fell about his ears and beat him so, that it put the whole house into an uproar." The Red Bull still

existed in 1663, but it was in a sorry state. In D'Avenant's play *A Theatre to Let* it was said to have no other "lodgers" than the spiders.

### THE PRIVATE THEATRES

It will be recalled that in 1576 Richard Farrant established a small private theatre at Blackfriars for the use of the Children of the Chapel. The six upper rooms from which it was adapted included part of the refectory of the old Priory, and it was undoubtedly these premises, not far from where Blackfriars Station stands to-day, that James Burbage acquired when in 1596, he purchased for six hundred pounds "all those seaven greate upper Romes as they are now divided, being all upon one flower and sometyme being one greate and entire rome."

On hearing of this transaction the citizens of the Blackfriars district petitioned the Privy Council: "That whereas one Burbage hath lately bought certaine roomes . . . and meaneth very shortly to convert and turne the same into a common playhouse which will grow to be a very greate annoyance and trouble . . . that therefore it would please your honors to take order that the same roomes may be converted to some other use, and that no playhouse may be used or kept there. . . ."

It was not Burbage's intention to erect a "common playhouse" at all, for he turned the premises into a private theatre which he continued to call The Blackfriars. In any case, the petition was ignored, for in 1597 he died, and his sons let the theatre to The Children of the Chapel, or rather to Henry Evans, "of Blackfriars, London; gentleman," who was in charge of those of the choristers who formed the body of child actors.

At this time the Children of the Chapel were enjoying considerable fame, for their company included Nathaniel Field and several others who distinguished themselves on the stage in later years. The company at The Globe was evidently a trifle jealous of the boys' success: in *Hamlet* we find Shakespeare describing them through the lips of Rosencrantz as ". . . an airy of children, little eyasses, that cry out on the top of question, and are most tyrannically clapped for't; these are now the fashion." Incidentally, their master Henry Evans let his enthusiasm run away with him, or perhaps it was just because he was lining his own pockets with the boys' earnings, for he was eventually convicted by the Star Chamber for kidnapping talented boys to fill vacancies in his company.

In 1608 the Burbage brothers took over The Blackfriars and operated it in connection with The Globe, with "The King's Men." Many famous plays were produced in it before it was destroyed in 1655.

Of the theatre at Whitefriars, which at one time also housed a company of child-actors, we have little authentic information, except that it was replaced in 1629 by a "faire new playhouse" called The Salisbury Court. This was the last theatre to be built before the Restoration. It was closed in 1644 and deteriorated to such an extent that it had to be rebuilt when it was required again in 1660. Six years later it was destroyed by fire. Part of the site on which it stood is now occupied by the Salisbury Square offices of the publishers of this book.

In the Drury Lane district was The Phoenix, known also as The Cockpit, built in 1616 and severely damaged by the riots of the apprentices on Shrove Tuesday 1617. In the "dark days" of the theatre Sir William D'Avenant produced an opera there, but that is a story which will be told in the next chapter.

#### A TYPICAL SHAKESPEAREAN THEATRE

It would be impossible to give an exact description of any one of the public theatres to which I have referred, but a fairly accurate impression of the type of playhouse for which Shakespeare wrote, and in which he himself played, may be gained from general details of the average theatre of that time.

In the public theatres the pits were open to the sky, so the number of performances each week depended entirely upon the weather. Flags were hoisted when a play was to be given, but if the weather suddenly changed for the worse, the flags were pulled down and the afternoon performance cancelled. The private theatres were roofed all over, so that plays could be given daily in all weathers.

The plays were well announced beforehand on handwritten or crudely printed bills displayed on posts in various parts of the city. The thoroughness with which this publicity was carried out evidently embittered the sour old John Northbrooke. He wrote: "They use to set up their \*billes upon posts\* some certaine days before, to admonish the people to make resort to their theatres, that they may thereby be the better furnished and the people to fill their purses with their treasures." It is a pity that none of these bills has been preserved, but it is fairly certain that little more than the title of the play was announced, because the practice of

proclaiming the names of the actors did not start in this country until the eighteenth century.

In the public theatres most plays were given in the afternoons, starting anytime between one and three o'clock, after trumpeters had sent out a ringing call to the playgoers of the town. Enthusiastic citizens would generally send their servants two or three hours before to occupy their seats until they were ready to take them.

The pit had no seats whatever, except in The Blackfriars and one or two other private theatres, where benches were provided.

The galleries, generally three, were made comparatively comfortable, especially the boxes. The uppermost tier was thatched or tiled.

The stage was a platform extending out into the body of the theatre, taking up nearly half of the pit, and being exposed on three sides to the audience. The main action and dialogue took place at the front of it, and there was of course no front curtain. The plays in those times had few stage directions: references to properties or even doors were nothing like so common as they are to-day, so the barest stage sufficed in most cases.

At the rear of the stage was a balcony, and there can be little doubt that in all the theatres of this period it was used with a curtain beneath it to form an inner stage, just as Burbage arranged his in The Theatre. In the old plays we find repeated references to this inner stage, particularly when characters had to be discovered there: it could be a cave, bedroom or anything in which persons or things had to be concealed for a while. The balcony itself served as an upper room, the city wall, or as any other elevated place. When it was not required by the actors it was sometimes used to accommodate the musicians. Higher still was a small room or hut in the roof: "the heavens" whence gods and goddesses could conveniently descend!

It is interesting to note how our present-day stage has evolved from this inner stage of the Shakespearean theatre. When scenery was introduced, the inner stage was used more extensively for scenes specially localized; consequently, as dramatists gave more precise directions concerning locality or properties, the inner stage became infinitely more important than the outer stage. Therefore, it grew steadily in size until it absorbed the whole of the outer stage, and ultimately became the "picture frame" stage we know so well to-day.

However, to return to the Shakespearean stage: it generally

had two doors on either side of the inner stage, and above them were usually windows or tiny balconies—sometimes both. More in the centre of the outer stage were one or two trapdoors to allow the entrance and exit of devils, ghosts and suchlike.

In the open public theatres, the plays were performed by daylight, but in the private playhouses quite brilliant illumination was provided by chandeliers. There were no footlights, of course: there is evidence that these were not introduced until 1672.

The price of admission was taken at the entrance, but there were several additional "gatherers" inside the theatre whose business it was to go around claiming the extra charges from those who occupied the better seats. These collectors were invariably a dishonest lot of rascals. Dekker dedicated one of his plays to "The Queen's Men" wishing them "a full audience and one honest door-keeper." Thomas Heywood in his *Apology for Actors* wrote "So wishing you judicall audiences, honest poets and true gatherers, I commit you all to the fulnesse of your best wishes."

In most of the theatres one could stand in the "yard," as the pit was still called, for a penny or two, but seats in the "gentlemen's boxes" could cost as much as half-a-crown—a considerable sum in those days. Prices were doubled and even trebled for first performances. As the expenses incurred by the companies were very small (the elaborate costumes were the biggest item) quite handsome profits were made.

While waiting for the play to start the audience would amuse themselves by eating apples and nuts, drinking ale, smoking, playing cards or dice. The "groundlings" (audience in the pit) were a very mixed crowd, as one would imagine. There were generally one or two pickpockets, half a dozen prostitutes, and plenty of men rather the worse for drink who were prepared to indulge in a brawl upon the slightest provocation.

Elizabethan audiences liked to see on the stage plenty of fighting, brutality, ghosts, devils and whatnot, and loved stories of horror, rape and villainy. Comedies had to be decidedly vulgar, and if they were not, the actors were apt to add obscenities of their own in one way or another. Nevertheless good poetry was appreciated, particularly by the upper classes. Even the most humble people seemed to be quick witted and intelligent, and a fine oration from the pen of Shakespeare which millions of people in this so-called enlightened age would now regard as boring, would work them up into a frenzy of delight.

Few women, except those of the lowest classes, attended the public theatre in Elizabeth's time, and those who did invariably wore masks to conceal their identity.

The pleasure of exhibiting themselves to the public eye frequently induced the vain young gallants and dandies in the audience to pay extra for the privilege of sitting on little stools at the sides of the stage. Dekker refers to this odious practice in his *Gull's Hornbooke* [1609]. In Chapter VI, under the heading "How a Gallant should behave himself in a Playhouse," he writes :

"By sitting on the stage you . . . may lawfully presume to be a girder" (i.e. a witty critic) ". . . if you be a knight you may happily get you a mistress; if a mere Fleet-street gentleman, a wife . . . you may purchase the dear acquaintance of the boys" (i.e. the boys who played the feminine parts).

Satirically, he continues :

"Present not yourself on the stage, especially at a new play, until the quaking Prologue hath by rubbing got colour into his cheeks, and is ready to give the trumpets their cue that he is upon the point to enter; for then it is time, as though you were one of the properties, or that you dropt out of the hangings, to creep up behind the arras, with your tripos or three-footed stool in one hand and a teston . . . (a coin then worth about six pence) . . . mounted between a forefinger and a thumb in the other; for, if you should bestow your person upon the vulgar, when the belly of the house is but half full, your apparel is quite eaten up, the fashion lost . . . avoid that as you would the bastome. It shall crown you with rich commendation, to laugh aloud in the middest of the most serious and saddest scene of the terriblest tragedy; and to let that clapper, your tongue, be tossed so high, that all the house may ring of it; . . . your knights are the apes of the lords, and do so too . . . all the eyes of the galleries will leave walking after the players, and only follow you . . . you mightily disrelish the audience . . . (Dekker referred previously to the presence of a 'stinkard') . . . and disgrace the author, . . . you take up, though it be at the w<sup>r</sup>st kind, a strong opinion of your own judgement."

It seems that gallants or other individuals offended by the playwrights or by one of the actors sometimes took these stage stools for the purpose of retaliation, for Dekker continues :

". . . if the writer be a fellow that hath either epigrammed you, or hath had a flirt at your mistress . . . you shall disgrace

him worse than by tossing him in a blanket . . . if, in the middle of his play, be it pastoral or comedy, 'moral' or tragedy, you rise with a screwed and discontented face from your stool to be gone; no matter whether the scenes be good or no; the better they are, the worse do you distaste them; and being on your feet sneak not away like a coward, but salute all your gentle acquaintance . . . : their poet crieth, perhaps, 'a pox go with you', but care not for that . . ."

### THE DRAMATIC COMPANIES

The theatrical profession flourished remarkably during Shakespeare's life: many actors grew wealthy and a few found fame. Moreover, they found favour at court and acquired a definite social status. Professional companies multiplied rapidly, and many toured the provinces. Such cities as Bristol, Norwich, Coventry and Leicester were visited regularly by the London players, though almost every town of any size had a company of its own.

The prosperity and favour enjoyed by the players during the early part of the seventeenth century provoked no small amount of jealousy among men in other walks of life: they could not forget that it was not so many years since the actors were considered by all respectable people to be vagabonds. In *The Return from Parnassus*, an anonymous University play dated 1601, a student complains bitterly about the players:

"Vile world that lifts them up to high degree,  
And treads us down in grovelling misery!  
England affords these glorious vagabonds,  
That carried erst their fardels on their backs,  
Coursers to ride on through the gazing streets,  
Sweeping it in their glaring satin suits,  
And pages to attend their masterships:  
With mouthing words that better wits have framed,  
They purchase lands, and now esquires are made."

In the space available it would be impossible to sketch even briefly the lives of all the great actors of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, and in any case, the biographical material available is scanty and not too reliable. Yet I must tell you a little about a few of the more outstanding figures.

Richard Tarlton (or Tarleton), the beloved jester, was one of the most prominent figures of his time. He was born in Shrop-

shire, but came to London when he was quite a young man, became an inn-keeper, married a woman of doubtful reputation named Kate, wrote ballads, taught fencing, and was eventually chosen for "The Queen's Men," remaining an actor until his death in 1588. This "Lord of Mirth" as he was called, with his flat nose and squinting eyes, was as tremendously popular at court as he was in the theatre. He was a great favourite of the Queen, and was said to be about the only person in London who could get her out of a disagreeable mood. John Stow, the famous sixteenth century chronicler wrote ". . . Richard Tarlton for a wondrous plentifull pleasant extemporal wit, hee was the wonder of his time." In the theatre, his retorts to wags in the audience were an unfailing source of delight. On one occasion a wit asked him in verse how he managed to get a flat nose. He countered it immediately with an improvisation that concluded :

<sup>1</sup> " Though my nose be flat,  
My credit to save,  
Yet very well I can by the smell  
Scent an honest man from a knave."

Another great actor was Edward Alleyn, who was born in 1566 and rose to fame very early in life. When he was barely twenty, he was playing leading parts as a member of "The Earl of Worcester's Men." Afterwards, he joined "The Lord Admiral's Men," and later still was associated with "The Prince's Men." With Henslowe, the eminent Elizabethan theatre manager, he built The Fortune theatre, to which I have already referred, and eventually became very wealthy. He bought the manor of Dulwich from Sir Francis Calton, and founded Dulwich College, which still possesses a full length portrait of him.

There seem to be no records to tell us precisely when William Kemp, Tarlton's successor, was born ; but we know that he began his career with "The Earl of Leicester's Men." This man has gone down in theatrical history as the player who once danced the Morris all the way from London to Norwich. He made substantial bets on his ability to do this, and then set out with a taborer, a servant and a witness, on the first Monday in Lent of 1599 (some reports give 1600 as the year). He took twenty-three days, encountered bad weather, grew distressingly weary, but eventually got there, and was welcomed by the Mayor of Norwich who gave him a prize and a pension! It is presumed

<sup>1</sup> *Tarlton's Jests.*

that he was for a time one of "The Lord Chamberlain's Men," but in 1602 he joined "The Earl of Worcester's Men."

We have already noted the activities of Richard Burbage [1567?–1619] as a theatre manager, but on the stage this son of James Burbage rivalled the great Edward Alleyn. His earliest experiences were gained as a boy in The Theatre, and he won membership of "The Earl of Leicester's Men" when he was quite a young man. At Christmas 1594 he was summoned with William Kemp and Shakespeare to act before the Queen at Greenwich Palace. This was Burbage's first glimpse of the court. He made his name at The Globe, however, and in a very short time his services were in great demand. He excelled in tragedy, and became very highly esteemed by the dramatists of the day. A quaint but useful account of his acting is to be found in Richard Flecknoe's *Short Discourse on the English Stage* [1660]:

"... he was a delightful Proteus, so wholly transforming himself into his part and putting off himself with his cloathes, as he never (not so much as in the Tyring House) assum'd himself again until the Play was done. . . . He had all the parts of an excellent actor . . . his auditors being never more delighted than when he spoke, nor so sorry than when he held his peace . . ."

Curiously enough, his figure was not a striking one: it seems that he was quite short and inclined to be stout. I might add that he was regarded as a citizen of some standing, and also happened to be a good painter in oils.

Finally, a note about Nathaniel Field, born in the parish of St. Giles, Cripplegate in 1587. He was one of the Children of the Chapel, when the child actors included Salathiel Pavy, Thomas Day, John Underwood, Robert Baxter and John Frost. He had such marked ability that he was chosen for "Lady Elizabeth's Servants" as soon as he became too old to act with the Children of the Chapel. Later, he joined "The King's Men" and played leading parts with Burbage. He also distinguished himself as a dramatist, for his play *A Woman is a Weathercock* [1612] was acted before the King at Whitehall. His *Amends for Ladies* followed in 1618, and he collaborated with Massinger in *The Fatal Dowry*.

#### THE COURT THEATRE

In Chapter One we saw what an important influence the court had upon the early development of the theatre, and noted that a Master of the Revels was in office when Queen Elizabeth came.

to the throne. He acted as the official Censor of plays throughout the Elizabethan period and for some years afterwards, and therefore played an important part in the shaping of drama in the Shakespearean age, for every play had to be "licensed" by him, and he was at liberty to delete any passages that he considered to be objectionable. For doing this he was allowed to charge a fee, which in time grew alarmingly.

Sir Henry Herbert, Master of the Revels from 1623 until 1662, when the post of Censor was abolished, charged extortionately, and made a very handsome income for himself. Although he came at the end of the period we are considering, it might interest the reader if I made two short quotations from his records. Of *The Young Admiral* by James Shirley, he writes that it is free from "oaths, prophaness or obsceanes" and that it might "serve for a patterne to other poetts, not only for the bettering of maners and language, but for the improvement of the quality, which hath received some brushings of late." On the other hand, we find him recording the receipt of a fee of two pounds for reading a new play "which I burnte for the ribaldry and offense that was in it."

I have already indicated that after the middle of the sixteenth century, plays at court became more popular than the masques, and consequently the professionals, both child and adult, gradually replaced the amateurs. The Children of the Chapel and the boys of St. Paul's School appeared frequently at court, but ultimately even these popular child actors gave way to the adult companies, although some of John Lyly's best work was written exclusively for them.

When Shakespeare appeared in London, the players were taking to the court of Elizabeth the same plays that they were performing at The Theatre and The Curtain: sure proof that despite the attitude of the Puritans, the Queen and her court appreciated the drama that appealed to the masses.

The court performances were more elaborate, for it seems that scenery made of canvas on wooden framework, such as had been used in the masques, was employed. At Whitehall, Hampton Court and Greenwich, the court plays were given at night by artificial light, in the most lavish of costumes. It is recorded that for a play in 1581 over a hundred pounds was spent in constructing a hill surmounted by a castle<sup>1</sup> "with falling sides, tree with shields, hermitage and hermit, savages, enchanter, chariot, and incidents to these." Among other accounts we find<sup>2</sup> "For pro-

<sup>1</sup> Feuillerat: 345-6.

<sup>2</sup> *ib d.*, 180.

vision and carriage of trees and other things to the court for a wilderness in a play."

When James I became King, his love of the spectacular resulted in a great revival of the court masque and a rapid development of it. Largely through the work of Inigo Jones, elaborate staging became possible, and a court masque, often costing well over a thousand pounds, would include a great deal of music and dancing, a play and plenty of grand pageantry. These masques took place in the great halls of the various palaces, in which special stages would be erected.

Here we come to a significant milestone in theatrical history, for it was the lavish staging of the masques that was responsible for the introduction of the proscenium arch and front curtain. They were first used as a novelty more than anything else. Most historians agree that their first appearance was in 1610 when they were used for a performance of Daniel's *Tethys Festival*. The innovation delighted the King and his court, so it is almost certain that the proscenium arch and curtain came into regular use at court at that time; indeed there seems to have been competition in the extent to which the frame of the arch could be decorated.

Changes of scene were at this time being made with increasing ingenuity, though, strange to relate, nobody thought of lowering the curtain while this was being done! Instead, they used a device of some sort to distract the attention of the audience. In the performance of *Tethys Festival* just mentioned, it is recorded that<sup>1</sup> "First at the opening of the heavens appeared three circles of lights and glasses, one with another, and came down in a straight motion five foote, and then began to moove circularly: which lights and motion so occupied the eyes of the spectators, that the manner of altering the scene was scarcely discerned; for in a moment the whole face of it was changed, the Poet vanished, and Tethys with her Nymphs appeared in their several Caverns gloriously adorned."

Two or three historians have also asserted that a change of scenery was sometimes concealed by "mists made from perfumes." Incredible as this may seem, it must be remembered that in this experimental period quite extraordinary things were attempted.

For the masque *Salmacida Spolia* given at the court of King Charles in 1640, Inigo Jones perfected a system of scenes sliding in grooves. In this masque, deities ascended and descended by means of a windlass beneath the stage.

<sup>1</sup> Daniel: *Works* ed. Grosart III. 315.

Curiously enough, the public theatres were slow to adopt the many new ideas and improvements devised for the court performances, although properties, costumes, etc., were occasionally borrowed officially or unofficially from the court. The expense of the spectacular masques was no doubt the reason why tragedy and comedy, with the more simple settings, continued to be the mainstay of the public theatres.

The costumes in the public theatres, however, were very nearly as elaborate as at court: money was spent unstintingly to procure the most gorgeous materials of the finest quality. There are records of lavish expenditure on silk, velvet, copper lace, satin, etc.: "a doublet and a pair of hose laid thick with gold lace," "a pair of Venetians of cloth of silver wrought in red silk," and "one cloke of velvette with a cape imbrothered with gold, pearles and red stones, and one roabe of cloth of gold: £16,"—are typical of the items that appeared in the accounts of the companies in the later Elizabethan period.

#### DRAMATISTS OF THE ELIZABETHAN AND JACOBEAN PERIOD

The dramatists of this golden age wrote for very small payment, and many had to supplement their income by doing hack-work for the booksellers. It will never be known exactly how much Shakespeare received for his plays, because he wrote exclusively for the company to which he was attached ("The Lord Chamberlain's Men," who afterwards became "The King's Men"), and it appears that very few, if any, accounts were kept. But some idea may be gathered from the knowledge that Dekker received only five pounds for *The Triplicity of Cuckolds*, and it is thought that few playwrights received more than about seven or eight pounds for each of their plays. To make matters worse, unscrupulous persons were in the habit of attending the theatres to take down the entire text of the plays in some sort of shorthand so that they could sell "pirated" editions.

Shakespeare's fortune was made primarily out of his partnership in The Globe, though no doubt his membership of the players' company secured him better terms than outside writers. As he never played any very great parts, it is presumed that his company always desired him to work more as a writer than an actor. It is also thought that he spent some of his time as a producer, because he is almost certain to have rehearsed his own plays, and might easily have directed some of the others as well. The dramatists



13. NELL GWYNNE by Sir Peter Lely



14. ANNE BRACEGIRDLE (from an old print)



15. SIR JOHN VANBRUGH by J. Closterman



16. - ANNE OLDFIELD (from the painting in the National Portrait Gallery)

often produced their own plays in those times: John Aubrey wrote of Ben Jonson that he "was never a good actor, but an excellent instructor." The rehearsal of a new play in Shakespeare's time would last two or three weeks. For this, the mornings were used, and punctuality was insisted upon; in fact at The Fortune it was the custom to fine latecomers one shilling.

The fact that boys played the women's parts probably accounts for the masculinity one finds in Elizabethan drama: Shakespeare's heroines, for instance, had far less to say than his heroes. Nevertheless, the boys played their parts with great skill and charm, and were dressed for the stage with the utmost taste and care. Pepys records having seen a boy actor who "made the loveliest lady that I ever saw in my life."

Let us now look at the lives of some of the men who wrote the great plays in the times of Elizabeth I, James I and Charles I. I am not going to attempt any sort of analysis of their work because that would be entirely outside the scope of this book, and besides, there are various books on the subject that can be obtained at any public library by those who are interested. Nor do I propose to include complete miniature biographies of all the dramatists of this age: the following sketches are included merely to help the reader to get a general impression of their lives, and to mention one or two of their most important works.

Most people are *au fait* with the life of William Shakespeare, but for the benefit of the few who are not, I will add a few notes, though to say that he was born at Stratford-on-Avon in 1564 is rather like declaring that London stands upon the banks of the Thames. Historians disagree about his father's profession: some say that John Shakespeare was a husbandman, others that he was a glover, butcher or wool-dealer; but we do know that the father of our greatest dramatist was an alderman and city chamberlain, and that by 1577 he had lost most of his money.

Shakespeare was educated at the Free Grammar School at Stratford, and was still in his "teens" when he became entangled with Anne Hathaway, about eight years his senior, who bore him a daughter (Susanna) six months after their marriage. Not long afterwards a pair of twins arrived, and Shakespeare found himself in the unenviable position of having a wife and three children to support on next to nothing. It is said that he left Stratford in 1585 to avoid being prosecuted for poaching. Whether that is true or not does not really matter, but he arrived in London in due course and was engaged to do minor duties at The Theatre.

He joined "The Lord Chamberlain's Men" and moved with them to The Globe. His success (more as a dramatist than an actor) enabled him to visit his native town in 1597 to buy "New Place," its largest house, to which he eventually retired in 1610.

As the Burbages gave members of their company shares in their theatres, Shakespeare acquired a partnership in both The Globe and The Blackfriars. He wrote on an average two plays a year, exclusively for his own company, who jealously withheld them from all other players. In 1627 for instance, "The King's Men" paid the Master of the Revels five pounds to forbid a performance of one of Shakespeare's plays at The Red Bull.

When he retired he was a moderately wealthy man, as he well deserved to be. Even then he paid frequent visits to London to keep in touch with the dramatists, players and poets of the day, and visited the theatres regularly until his death in 1616.

His greatness as a dramatist was of course due to his amazing comprehension of human nature, his rich, masterly depiction of character, and his genius as a poet.

Christopher Marlowe was also born in 1564, son of a shoemaker of Canterbury. He was educated at King's School in that city, and at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. He settled in London and became attached to "The Lord Admiral's Men," who produced most of his plays. In at least three of them Edward Alleyn played the title-rôles.

Marlowe, who was on friendly terms with Shakespeare, Nashe and Sir Walter Ralegh, wrote his masterpiece *Edward II* in 1593. In the same year a warrant was issued for his arrest because of his persistent dissemination of atheistic opinions, but he was killed during a violent quarrel in a tavern at Deptford. Francis Meres in *Palladis Tamia* [1598] wrote: ". . . Christopher Marlowe was stabd to death by a bawdy serving-man, a rual of his in lewde love." William Vaughan in *Golden Grove* gives the name of his murderer as Ingram.

Closely associated with Marlowe was Thomas Kyd (or Kid), son of a London scrivener. He was born about the year 1557, and went to the Merchant Taylors' School. He became a great exponent of a somewhat bombastic type of tragedy, and his *Spanish Tragedy* [1592] is certainly of some importance. Shortly after Marlowe's death, Kyd was charged with holding "scandalous opinions regarding morality and religion." Some say that he was imprisoned and tortured before his death in 1594, but there is no definite evidence of this.

Of an entirely different type was George Peele [1558?–1598?], one of the famous “University Wits” of the day. He was the son of a London salter, and was educated at Christ’s Hospital and Oxford. While he was at the University he wrote his *Tale of Troy*. When he came down, he began leading a dissipated life and was turned out of his father’s house. He married thereby acquiring considerable property, and became one of the Bohemians of London. For a while he was a member of “The Lord Admiral’s Men” and also of “The Queen’s Men.” Noteworthy among his plays are *The Arraignment of Paris*, *Edward I*, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, and *David and Bathsheba*. His lyrics are particularly charming.

One of the most amazing characters of this period was Robert Greene [1560–1592]. Born at Norwich and educated at Cambridge, he went abroad as a young man and led a dissolute life for several years. Then he returned to England, married “a gentleman’s daughter of good account,” had a child, and then deserted his wife as soon as he had spent her dowry. He continued to live viciously in London, but died in poverty before reaching middle-age as a result of over-indulgence in pickled herrings and Rhenish wine. What is so extraordinary is that his writings are singularly free from traces of salaciousness. His best works are *The Honorable Historie of Friar Bacon and Friar Bongay* and *Menaphon*, reprinted as *Greene’s Arcadia* in 1599.

Thomas Nashe [1567–1601] was born at Lowestoft, son of a minister. He was educated at St. John’s College, Cambridge, and settled in London in 1588 after a tour through France and Italy. He seems to have been very poor because he confessed that he had been obliged to get money by writing bawdy songs “for gentlemen”. He detested the Puritans and all that they stood for, and flayed them mercilessly in his pamphlets, plays and novels. His political comedy *The Isle of Dogs*, in which he attacked many notorious abuses that were going on at that time, caused him to be sent to prison for several months. Unfortunately, this play has now been lost. In 1599 he published *Nashe’s Lenten Stuffe: containing the Description and First Procreation and Increase of the Towne of Great Yarmouth, in Norfolke*, a burlesque panegyric of the red herring. The following year saw his *Surmer’s Last Will*, a satirical masque. Most important, however, is his spirited, witty *Unfortunate Traveller*, the life of Jacke Wilton, “a certaine kinde of appendix or page” at the court of Henry VIII.

Nothing is known of the early life of Thomas Middleton [1570–1627] who was probably born in London and entered Gray’s

Inn as a young man. He does not appear to have become associated with the stage until 1599. Early in the seventeenth century he was writing for "The Lord Admiral's Men," and in 1613 he was commissioned to write speeches for the ceremonial opening of the New River. He also wrote a pageant to celebrate the mayoralty of Sir Thomas Myddelton, and in 1621 was appointed city chronologer. His political drama *A Game at Chess* [1624] was extremely popular, but after a complaint from the Spanish ambassador, who strongly objected to this "very scandalous comedy acted publickly by the King's Players," Middleton and his actors were summoned before the Privy Council; whereupon the players produced "an original and perfect copy of the play seen and allowed" by the Master of the Revels (Sir Henry Herbert) and were acquitted with only a "sound and sharp reproof." Middleton himself did not appear. Much of his work was done in collaboration with Dekker, Munday and Rowley. His most important plays are *Women Beware Women* [1612] and *The Changeling* [1621].

Quite a contrast to most of his contemporaries was Thomas Dekker [1570?–1641?], who so delightfully portrayed in his works the life of London in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period. Very little is known about his youth, but Henslowe engaged him in 1598 to write plays for his theatre, some of which were done in collaboration with Ben Jonson, Drayton and others. Dekker's most successful work is *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, one of the best Elizabethan comedies we possess. It has been revived in modern times.

He also wrote a number of pamphlets, and the amusing *Gull's Hornbooke*, to which I have already referred, has been of great value to historians of the theatre. Dekker was one of the most lovable figures in English literature: he was extremely kind and sympathetic to the poor, and was beloved by all his associates for his unfailing good humour. He was usually desperately poor, yet he lived a carefree, happy-go-lucky life. In 1613 his financial difficulties became acute, and he was sent to prison for debt. Some say that he stayed there for six or seven years. His lyric *Art thou poor, yet hast thou golden slumbers?* reflects perfectly his sunny, contented disposition. There is pure genius in all his poetry.

Ben Jonson was born in 1573 in Westminster, and was educated at Westminster School. His step-father, a bricklayer, insisted upon his entering the building trade, but after a while

Ben rebelled and joined the army. He returned to London in 1592, married, and became associated with Henslowe's company both as an actor and playwright. He lived a Bohemian life, and was an extremely quarrelsome character. He fought a duel with Gabriel Spencer, a fellow actor; killed him and went to prison for a year. While he was there he became a Catholic, but twelve years later recanted. Shakespeare played in his *Every Man in his Humour* when "The Lord Chamberlain's Men" produced it in 1598, and this was followed within a year by *Every Man out of his Humour*, in which he caricatured all that he disliked in London life. His battle of wits with John Marston, Shakespeare and Dekker produced such comedies as *Cynthia's Revels* and *The Poetaster*. His first tragedy *Sejanus* was performed at The Globe in 1603 with Shakespeare and Burbage in the cast. On Twelfth Night 1605 his *Masque of Blacknesse* was given at court with scenery by Inigo Jones, and from that time he continued to write masques for the King. James I favoured him and granted him a pension in 1616. Jonson's greatest work was perhaps the comedy *The Alchemist* [1610], though *Bartholomew Fayre* in which he portrays a London fair, is most entertaining. He was elected chronologer of London in 1628.

Although his quarrelsome nature must be deplored, his satiric writing had a profound effect at the time. He showed no sympathy to the Puritans, and he was always ready to attack the corruption that was rife in those days. He was arrogant, warm hearted, and an honest literary critic. Towards the end of his life he lost the patronage of the court after a quarrel with Inigo Jones, but even this did not dampen his buoyant humour. He died on August 6th, 1637, and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

John Fletcher [1579-1625] will always be associated with Francis Beaumont [1584-1616] with whom he collaborated for over ten years. He was born at Rye, Sussex, and educated at Cambridge. It is generally acknowledged that Fletcher was responsible for part of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*. His comedies are rich in wit, and have a pleasant freshness, but he never achieved much success as a tragedian.

Another prominent dramatist of this period was Philip Massinger [1583-1640], who was born at Salisbury and educated at St. Alban Hall, Oxford. He came to London seeking the acquaintance of other dramatists, and collaborated with Fletcher, Nathaniel Field, Daborne and Dekker. His best work is the comedy *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, in which the character

Sir Giles Overreach has always been considered to be a test of an actor's skill.

There is some doubt concerning the year in which Thomas Heywood was born. He was a Lincolnshire man, and connected first with "The Lord Admiral's Men" and then with "The Queen's Men." It is said that he wrote the majority of his plays in a tavern on the back of handbills. He was a good scholar, and translated many works of Lucian and certain Latin writers. *A Woman Kilde with Kindnesse* [circa. 1603] is generally considered to be his best comedy.

Little is known about the life of John Ford [1586-1639]. He was probably admitted to the Middle Temple, because his work shows a fair knowledge of the legal world. One of his most brilliant plays is the rather repulsive *Tis a Pity She's a Whore* [1626], first staged by the "Queenes Maiesties Servants at the Phoenix in Drury Lane." *The Broken Heart* [1633] and *The Witch of Edmonton* [1621] are also of some importance, but most of his work reflects a melancholy disposition that has been summed up in a couplet in *Choice Drollery* [1656] :

"Deep in a dump John Foide was alone got,  
With folded arms and melancholy hat."

The recent and successful revival of *The Duchess of Malfi* has given us some idea of the power of John Webster [1580?-1625?], son of a London tailor. He collaborated with two or three of his contemporaries in comedy, but on his tragedies rests his greatness. *The White Divel* [circa. 1608] is another good specimen of his work.

Finally, we come to James Shirley [1596-1666] "the last of the Elizabethans." He was born in London, educated at The Merchant Taylors' School and both Oxford and Cambridge, and wrote something like forty dramas. His best play is *Love's Cruelty* [1640]. It is recorded that he was converted to Catholicism, and died as a result of exposure during the Great Fire of London.

#### THE END OF A GOLDEN AGE

From the year 1620 onwards the theatre gradually fell into disfavour. In 1642 the struggle between the King and Parliament culminated in the Civil War, and the following order was made on the second day of September in that year:<sup>1</sup>

"Whereas the distressed Estate of Ireland, steeped in her

<sup>1</sup> *Rosomus Anglicanus.*

own 'Blood, and the distracted Estate of England, threatened with a cloud of Blood, by a Civill Warre, call for all possible meanes to appease and avert the Wrath of God appearing in these Judgments ; amongst which Fasting and Prayer have been often tried to be very effectual, have been lately, and are still enjoyned, and whereas publike Sports doe not well agree with publike Calamities, nor publike Stage-playes with the Seasons of Humiliation, and the other being Spectacles of, too commonly expressing lacivious Mirth and Levitie. It is therefore thought fit, and ordeined by the Lords and Commons in this Parliament Assembled, that while these sad Causes and set times of Humiliation doe continue, publike Stage-playes shall cease, and bee forborne. Instead of which are recommended to the people of this Land, the profitable and seasonable Considerations of Repentance, Reconciliation, and peace with God, which probably may produce outward peace and prosperity, and bring again Times of Joy and Gladness to these Nations."

This closed the most glorious period in the history of English drama. The brilliant theatrical splendour of the court masques remained only as a dream in the memory.

At first there was widespread resistance to the Order, but further orders followed in terms of the utmost severity. Actors were threatened with imprisonment, and finally all were declared to be "rogues and vagabonds." Players found acting in secret were flogged, and any person witnessing a dramatic performance was fined five shillings.

The players were almost entirely Royalists, many fought for the King, and all were persecuted after the execution of Charles. Many fled to the continent and continued to practise their art in the theatres of France and Italy.

In 1647 the light of dramatic art in England was but a barely perceptible glimmer, and it would have flickered out entirely but for the few determined rebels who continued to play behind locked doors. In the houses of some of the noblemen, plays were staged in secret from time to time before select Royalist audiences, but the only traces of public drama that remained were a few quite negligible and stupid "drolls" at country fairs.

## Chapter III

### THE RESTORATION THEATRE

WE find that the years 1642-1660 are pathetically empty as we look back through the history of the English theatre. It must not be imagined that the players submitted meekly to the tyranny of Parliament however, for in 1643 there appeared a pamphlet called *The Actors' Remonstrance or Complaint for the Silencing of their Profession*. It ran :

“ Oppressed with many calamities, and languishing to death under the burthen of a long and . . . everlasting restraint, wee, the comedians, tragedians, and actors of all sorts and sizes, belonging to the famous private and publike houses within the City of London . . . in all humility present this our lamentable complaint.

“ First, it is not unknowne . . . that wee have purged our stages from all obscene and scurrilous jests, that wee have endeavoured . . . to repress bawling and ranting . . . and to suit our language to the more gentle and natural garb of the times. Yet are wee, by authority, restrained from the practice of our profession . . . to the great impoverishment and utter undoings of ourselves, wives, children and dependents. Besides, which is, of all others, our greatest grievance, that playes being put down . . . other recreations of farre-more harmfull consequence are permitted still to stand, viz., . . . the Bear Garden, where those demi-monsters are baited by ban dogs ; the gentlemen of Stave and Taile, namely cutting coblers, hard-handed masons, and the like rioting companions, resorting thither . . . making with their sweat and crowding, a farre worse stink than the ill-formed beastes they persecute. . . .

“ Our fooles . . . are enforced to maintain themselves by virtue of their baubles. Our boyes, ere wee shall have libertie to act againe, will be grown out of use like crackt organ pipes, . . . Nay, our verie doore-keepers . . . most grievously complain that by this cessation they are robbed of the privilege of stealing from us with licence ; they cannot now seem to scratch their heads where they itch not, and drop shillings and half-



17. CATHERINE (KITTY) CLIVE by Hogarth



18. JAMES QUIN by Hogarth



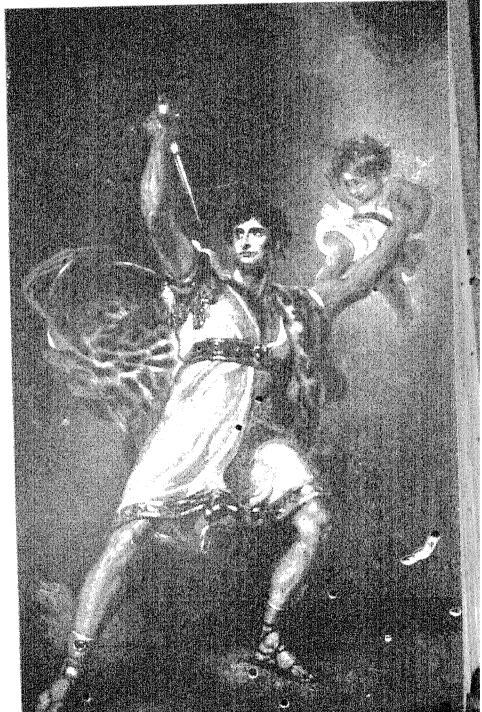
19. GARRICK as Hamlet,  
engraved by B. Wilson, after J. McArdell

21. MRS. SIDDONS  
as Lady Macbeth



20. GARRICK as Abel Drugger,  
engraved by S. W. Reynolds, after J. Zoffany

22. JOHN PHILIP KEMBLE  
as Rolla in *Pizarro*





23. DAVID GARRICK AND HIS WIFE (from the painting by Hogarth at Windsor)  
*Reproduced by Gracious Permission of Her Majesty The Queen.*



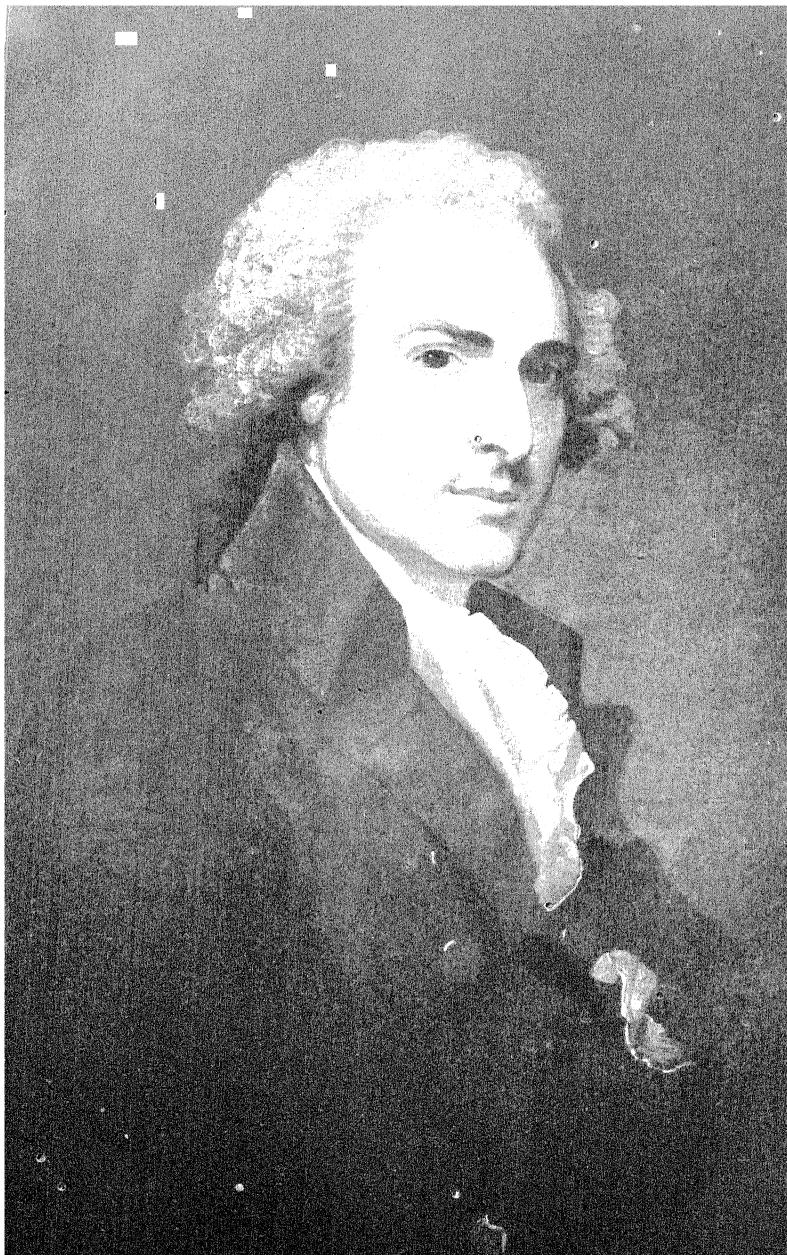
24. PEG WOFFINGTON (Jones Collection: artist unknown)



25. The Second Drury Lane Theatre (designed by Sir Christopher Wren; the Adam front shown here was added later)



MBLE as Romeo, after Cowell



27. JOHN PHILIP KEMBLE, by G. Stuart

crown pieces in at their collars. Our musique, that was held so delectable and precious that they scorned to go to a tavern under twentie shillings salarye for two hours, now wander with their instruments under their cloaks, I meane such as have any, into all houses of good fellowship, saluting every roome where there is company with 'Will you have any musique, gentlemen?' . . . our stock of cloathes, such as are not in tribulation for generall use, being a sacrifice to moths . . .

"The tobacco-men that used to walk up and down selling for a penny a pipe that which was not worth twelvepence a horse-load, are now found tapsters in inns and tipling houses. . . . some of our ablest ordinarie poets . . . (are) being for meere necessitie, compelled to get a living by writing contemptible penny pamphlets, and feigning miraculous stories of unheard of battels. Nay, it is to be feared that shortly some of them will be incited to write ballads."

The petition concludes with an appeal that the players be reinstated, and promises that they will admit none but reputable females into their sixpenny rooms or boxes, permit only the best tobacco to be sold in their theatres, and avoid ribaldry.

Prominent among those continuing the struggle was Sir William D'Avenant, poet, playwright and theatre-manager. Towards the end of the Protectorate he succeeded in convincing the authorities that opera was but a revival of a branch of the ancient art of Greece and Rome, and thus persuaded them to allow him to perform the opera *The Siege of Rhodes* at Rutland House. This production in 1656 was another important milestone in theatrical history, not only because it was the first opera to be performed in this country, but because it was the first time an Englishwoman appeared on the stage. Her name was Mrs. Coleman. Ladies of the Court had appeared in the masques, of course, but professional English actresses were unknown at that time. Within two years, D'Avenant was staging other operas at the Phoenix (the old Cockpit).

When Charles II landed in England in 1660 three rather precarious companies had re-started, but he authorized Sir William D'Avenant and Sir Thomas Killigrew to organize two new companies of players, for the "merry monarch" was not going to be deprived of the amusements he had enjoyed in France.

D'Avenant immediately gathered together a body of players to whom was given the title "The Duke of York's Company," and installed them first of all at the Salisbury Court Theatre.

Killigrew assembled "The King's Company" and to provide suitable accommodation for them ordered the erection of the first Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, which was opened in 1663 with a play called *The Humorous Lieutenant* by Beaumont and Fletcher.

While the Theatre Royal was being built, Killigrew's company played at the Tennis Court Theatre in Vere Street. Pepys visited this playhouse on January 3rd, 1661, and recorded: ". . . it (the play *Beggar's Bush*) being very well done, and here for the first time that I ever saw women come upon the stage."

It should be noted, however, that boys were still being used in women's parts from time to time, because the famous old diarist tells us that a few days later he went to the same theatre and saw "Kinaston, the boy" as Epicene in Jonson's *Silent Woman*, adding that in feminine attire the lad was "the prettiest woman in the whole house."

There was very keen competition between the King's Company and the Duke's. Cibber declares that they were both prosperous for some years, "'till their Variety of Plays began to be exhausted: Then of course, the better Actors (which the King's seem to have been allowed) could not fail of drawing the greater Audiences. Sir William D'Avenant, therefore, Master of the Duke's Company, to make Head against their Success, was forced to add Spectacle and Music to Action; and to introduce a new species of Plays, since call'd Dramatick Opera's, of which Kind were the *Tempest*, *Psyche*, *Circe* and others, all set off with the most expensive Decorations of Scenes and Habits, with the best Voices and Dancers."

The theatres of this period afforded ample opportunities for elaborate staging. The closed-in playhouse had triumphed over the open arena-type structure, enabling the experience gained in the lavish court masques to be put to good use. The orchestra found its place before the stage, and the theatre began to appear as we know it today.

When D'Avenant died in 1668 a new theatre for the Duke's Company was already under construction in Dorset Garden, close to the old Salisbury Court Theatre, to plans drawn by Christopher Wren. This was opened in 1671, a magnificently appointed house with decorations by Grinling Gibbons. It cost five thousand pounds, an enormous sum in those days, and caused a minor sensation in London.

#### THE FIRST "THEATRE ROYAL," DRURY LANE

In Killigrew's time, Drury Lane was a most aristocratic quarter

of the town: the Earls of Anglesey, Craven and Clare all lived there in imposing mansions. What a contrast to its present day squalor!

The first Theatre Royal was built at a cost of fifteen hundred pounds, a structure measuring a hundred and twelve feet by fifty-nine feet. Performances were given in the afternoons, and the prices of admission were: Pit half-a-crown, Balcony one shilling and sixpence, Upper Gallery a shilling and Boxes four shillings.

The leading actors of the King's Company were Michael Mohun and Charles Hart. Mohun had served as a Major in the Civil War, fighting on the side of the King at Edgehill in 1642. Hart, a grandson of Shakespeare's sister Joan, was a tall, dignified man of exceptional ability, particularly in tragedy. The Company also included John Lacey, a famous Falstaff, who was a great favourite with the King.

It was at Drury Lane in 1665 that Nell Gwynne made her first appearance as an actress. The story of her life is really astonishing, but before telling it briefly, I must point out that historians disagree on certain incidents in her early years.

There is some doubt about her birthplace, but the city of Hereford seems to have the strongest claim. It is said that she ran away from home when she was quite a child, came to London, found lodgings in Coal Yard, near Drury Lane, and first earned her living by selling herrings in the streets. This voluptuously good-looking, impudent little wench was later employed to sell oranges in the pit at the Theatre Royal, where she soon proved that she could match the audacity of the coarsest of the beaux who tried to flirt with her. Despite the fact that she swore like a trooper, John Lacey took a benevolent interest in her, and gave her instruction in elocution, deportment, and so forth. She improved so quickly that it was but a matter of months before she won the affection of Charles Hart, who began giving her lessons in dramatic art. His patient training enabled her to take the part of Cydaria in Dryden's *Indian Emperor* when she was only fifteen years of age. She was not much of a success in this particular rôle, but as soon as they tried her out in comedy she caused a furore. She spoke well, danced perfectly, and acquired a most fascinating laugh. Crowds swarmed from all over London to see and hear her, and our old friend Pepys declared that a play without Nell was no play at all.

The King visited the theatre one afternoon in 1669 when she was playing and was completely captivated. That very evening

he carried her off and made her his mistress. In the following year she bore a son Charles, and a second arrived within the next twelve months. This younger boy died at the age of nine.

One day, in the presence of the King, she addressed her son Charles using a vulgar expression referring to his illegitimacy. When reproved, she told the King that she did not know what else she could call the lad, so Charles made his illegitimate son an earl, and in due course the boy became the Duke of St. Albans.

Doran, in *Their Majesties' Servants*, tells us that the last of Nell Gwynne's original characters was that of Almahide in Dryden's *Conquest of Granada*, and adds that she spoke the prologue in a straw hat "as broad as a cartwheel, and thereby almost killed the King with laughter."

Her outrageous extravagance became a public scandal. The King was so obsessed with her charms that he gave her a luxurious residence in Pall Mall and another at Windsor (Burford House) and in four years she extorted from him over sixty thousand pounds, which would be something like half-a-million pounds to-day. Not content with this she induced the King to secure her an income of six thousand pounds a year from the Excise, and to command that a further three thousand a year be paid to her son. The people had some justification, therefore, in making bitter complaints about the expense of the King's pleasures. It is said that Nell Gwynne lost fourteen hundred pounds in one evening at Basset (a card game). She died *heavily in debt* in November, 1687, aged thirty-seven.

The King was a keen patron of the theatre at this time, and he saw that the players enjoyed a high social status. Colley Cibber in his *Apology* informs us :

"About ten of the King's company were on the Royal Household Establishment, having each ten yards of scarlet cloth, with a proper Quantity of Lace allow'd them for Liveries; and in their Warrants from the Lord Chamberlain were stiled 'Gentlemen of the Great Chamber'; Whether the like Appointments were extended to the Duke's Company, I am not certain; but they were both in high Estimation with the Publick, and so much the Delight and Concern of the Court, that they were not only supported by its being frequently present at their publick Presentations, but by its taking Cognizance of their private Government, insomuch, that their particular Differences, Pretensions or Complaints, were generally ended by the King or Duke's Personal Command or Decision . . ."

In 1670 Parliament tried to impose a tax upon the theatres, but the Court party strongly opposed the suggestion on the grounds that the actors were the King's servants and part of his "pleasure." This caused Sir John Coventry to ask in the House whether His Majesty's pleasure was to be found among the actors or actresses. Whereupon the King hired a band of desperados to waylay Sir John and cut off his nose.

### THE SECOND "THEATRE ROYAL," DRURY LANE

In January 1672 the Theatre Royal was destroyed by fire, and the Company withdrew for a while to Lincoln's Inn Fields while a new playhouse was being built. This was designed by Wren, cost four thousand pounds, and opened on March 26th, 1674. We are told by H. Barton Baker in *The London Stage* that it was built to rival the magnificence of the Duke's House. Referring to its stage, he quotes Cibber to inform us that it "projected in a semi-oval figure right forward to the front bench of the pit, with side wings for the entrances in place of stage boxes, so that the whole action of the play was carried on beyond the pillars of the proscenium." Although considerable alterations were made later, Cibber was very much in favour of the original arrangement because "the most subtle shades of facial expression could be seen, and the softest whispers and most delicate intonations of the voice could be heard and better appreciated by the spectators."

Rivalry between the two companies continued, but Hart and Mohun were getting old, and the audiences were deteriorating in both quantity and quality. For that reason, the two companies were amalgamated on November 16th, 1682, "by the King's advice." The signatories to the agreement were Charles D'Avenant, son of Sir William, William Smith and Thomas Betterton for the Duke's Company, and Charles Hart and Edward Kynaston for the King's. In the same year, Killigrew died and Hart retired.

The union of the two companies did little to improve matters. The support of the public continued to dwindle until in 1690 Charles D'Avenant sold his interests to a roguish lawyer named Christopher Rich who treated the players so badly that in 1695 they appealed to the King, William III, to intervene. His Majesty showed them great sympathy and kindness, and commanded that a licence be granted to them to re-open the old theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Two years before this happened, William Congreve, a young

law student of whom we shall hear more later, had amazed the theatre world with the success of his first comedy *The Old Bachelor*. He had been entirely in sympathy with the Theatre Royal players in all their troubles, and when they embarked upon this new venture he took an active share in the management and gave them his immortal comedy *Love for Love*, which he had written for Drury Lane. This play was staged on the opening night, April 30th, 1695, with Betterton, Dogget, Underhill, Sandford, Mrs. Barry, Mrs. Bowman and Mrs. Bracegirdle in the cast, and was a great success.

Alas! in 1697, just as some small measure of prosperity was returning, Jeremy Collier published his *Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage* and stirred up a strong puritanical agitation against the theatres again. Collier's attack was not entirely unjustified, but it confused the levities of men like Congreve with the vulgarities of various second-rate writers of the time. Nevertheless, Congreve replied in the following year with *Amendments of Mr. Collier's False and Imperfect Citations*, but made little impression upon public opinion.

In 1699 the King's Chamberlain felt obliged to send a warning to both Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn Fields about the use of profane and indecent expressions in plays.

### RESTORATION PLAYHOUSES

Before we go any further, let us note one or two general conditions prevailing in the playhouses in the middle and towards the end of the seventeenth century. The theatres, as in Elizabethan times, still attracted gallants and fops who went primarily to show themselves off. This was harmless enough, but some of them, following the example of certain young noblemen, were not content to indulge in badinage with the orange-girls; and instead of making themselves a nuisance by sitting on the stage, they started a much more objectionable practice: haunting the tiring-rooms of the actresses when they were dressing and undressing. Because of the rank and influence of some of the young noblemen, it was at first thought inadvisable to reprove them; but in time their behaviour caused such a scandal that Charles II had to forbid it.

It is to be regretted that the theatres still remained a hunting ground for those bent on promiscuity. The middle gallery became notorious for its genteel courtesans who wore masks and carried on flirtations incognito, and this, too, developed into a

highly undesirable form of amusement. Finally, in 1704, Queen Anne felt obliged to prohibit the wearing of masks by members of the audience.

The uppermost gallery was the cheapest part of the house, and was therefore the resort of the rabble. Christopher Rich, at a time when audiences were numerically poor, once started allowing the lackeys to sit in the Upper Gallery free of charge, but as they behaved so badly the practice had to be stopped.

We now enter upon another period of vicissitudes in the history of the London theatres, but as we have other matters to consider, it would be impossible to set out in detail and in sequence all these ups and downs, and in any case, they are not of any very great importance to us, for we are concerned with the general story of the theatre rather than masses of minor historical facts. So let us now turn to the lives of some of the actors, actresses and playwrights of this Restoration period.

### PLAYERS AND PLAYWRIGHTS

Thomas Betterton [1635?–1710] was the greatest actor on the English stage in those days. He was born in Tothill Street, Westminster, son of the under-cook to Charles I. He was apprenticed to John Holden, a bookseller, and acquired a taste for reading good literature, but we have few reliable facts about his early life. He made his first appearance at The Cockpit with a company of players under John Rhodes in 1660, but Sir William D'Avenant engaged him with the rest of the company for the new theatre at Lincoln's Inn Fields in the following year. He stayed with the Duke's Company, and after D'Avenant's death took over the management. When the two major companies were amalgamated in 1682 he went to Drury Lane, and played there until all the principals seceded in 1695. He then shone at Lincoln's Inn Fields for several years but when the theatre came into another period of disfavour, he retired from the stage. His last appearance was in 1710 as Melantius in *The Maid's Tragedy* (Beaumont and Fletcher).

Pepys regarded Betterton as "the best actor in the world" and the King, Charles II, esteemed him so highly that he sent him to Paris to make a study of French theatrical art. As Hamlet, particularly, he could command "an universal attention even from the fops and flower-girls." He was fairly tall, a dignified austere figure, possessing a voice with a remarkable range of intonation. At his benefit performance he played Valentine in

*Love for Love*, and made a profit of over five hundred pounds. He died on April 28th, and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

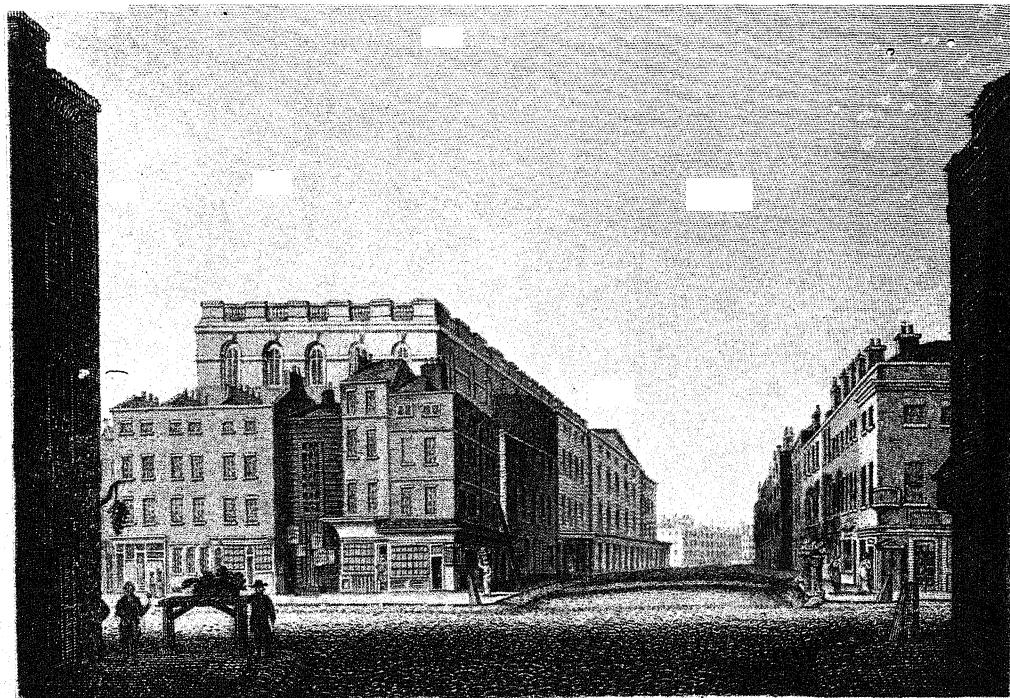
Elizabeth Barry [1658-1713] was the daughter of a barrister who fought as a Colonel on the side of the King in the Civil War. After her father's death, D'Avenant took her into his house and trained her for the stage. She was very dull at first, but the young Earl of Rochester took an interest in her (for more than one reason) and instructed her personally. In his *Dramatic Miscellanies*, Davies tells us that Rochester, having wagered that within six months he would make her into an actress, "taught her not only the proper cadence or sounding of the voice, but to seize also the passions, and adapt her whole behaviour to the situations of the character." She first appeared in 1673 at Dorset Garden as Isabella, Queen of Hungary, in *Mustapha* by the Earl of Orrery, and in a few years blossomed as one of the greatest actresses of the seventeenth century. Cibber said that she had a presence of "elevated dignity" in characters of greatness; and that her voice was full, clear and strong "so that no violence of passion could be too much for her": yet she could subside into "the most affecting melody and softness," and in the art of exciting pity she had a power greater than any actress he had ever seen. Her private life was notorious. She was last seen on the stage in Dryden's *Spanish Friar*, at the Haymarket in 1710, the day after Betterton retired, and she died at Acton (then a country village) in 1713.

Another famous actress in the seventeenth century was Anne Bracegirdle [1663?-1748], a most fascinating woman. She came from Northamptonshire as a child, and was placed in the care of Thomas Betterton and his wife. It is said that she first appeared when little more than a child at Dorset Garden as a page in *The Orphan* (Otway). She was much admired by Congreve, who wrote the parts of Araminta in *The Old Bachelor*, and Angelica in *Love for Love* specially for her. It was in these rôles that she became so famous. She retired from the stage early in life—in 1707—as soon as she saw that her supremacy was challenged, though she returned on one occasion to play in Betterton's benefit performance. She was buried in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey.

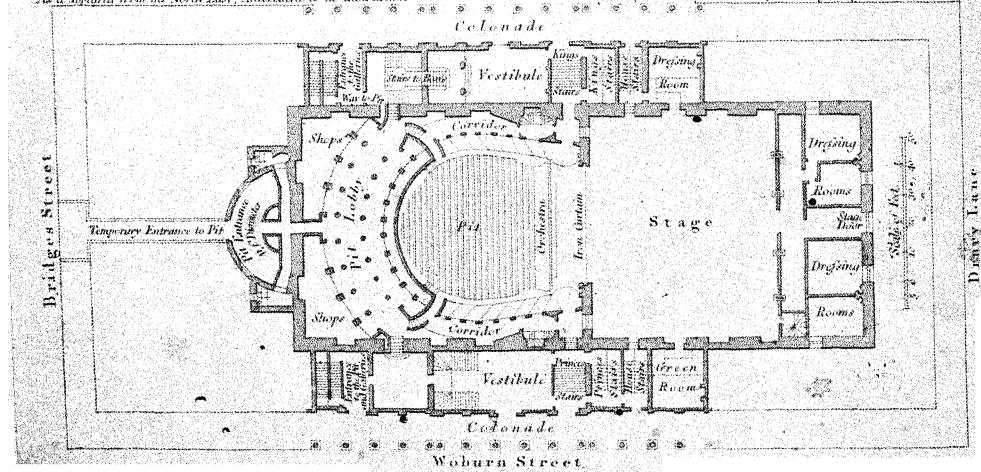
Turning to the writers of the Restoration period we come first to John Dryden [1631-1700]. He was born at Aldwinkle, Northants, educated at Westminster School and Cambridge, and came to London in 1657. He was an admirer of Cromwell, and wrote the *Heroic Stanzas* as a tribute to him, but when the Stuarts returned to the throne he adapted himself readily to the new



28. SARAH SIDDONS by Gainsborough



As it appeared from the North East; Antecedent to its destruction. Rutherford Street, to fire on the Night of the 24<sup>th</sup> February, 1809. With a Plan.



London Publishing List, 1990, by Blackwells, Oxford, England

order, celebrating their restoration by his *Astrea Redux* [1660], which was followed shortly afterwards by a *Panegyric on the Restoration*.

Deciding to seek a livelihood from the theatres, he wrote a tragedy about Henry, Duke of Guise, but this was a failure, so he turned, somewhat reluctantly, to comedy. After two more failures he wrote a comedy called *The Rival Ladies*, which was produced in 1663 and was very well received. Pepys described it as "a very innocent and most pretty, witty play." But this did not establish him very firmly as a dramatist because several of his later plays met with little success.

Dryden's first notable success was with *The Indian Queen*, a play written in collaboration with Sir Robert Howard, which was lavishly produced in 1664. In little more than a year he followed it up with *The Indian Emperor*. Then came *Secret Love* and *Sir Martin Mar-all*, which were both staged in 1667. The latter is an adaptation of Molière's *L'Étourdi*. It was at about this time that he made a contract to write regularly for the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, but never produced the number of plays agreed upon.

He was appointed Poet Laureate in 1668 and Historiographer Royal two years later. His most important works are undoubtedly his *Tyrannic Love* [1669], *The Conquest of Granada* [1670] and *All for Love* [1678]. In the last of these, which is generally considered to be his finest play, he adopted blank verse.

Dryden was suspected of being the author of Mulgrave's *Essay on Satire* [1679], an attack on the court and the Earl of Rochester in particular, and was severely beaten in Rose Alley, Covent Garden, by a gang of ruffians in the pay of the Earl. Actually, his sympathies were entirely on the side of the court, and he wrote later as a satirist in support of these views.

He became a Catholic on the accession of James in 1685, and in consequence was deprived of his offices and pension three years later at the Revolution. He died at his house in Gerrard-street, London, on May 1st, 1700, and was buried in Westminster Abbey, in Chaucer's grave.

Thomas Otway was born at Trottenden, near Midhurst, Sussex, in 1652, son of a parson. He was educated at Winchester College and Christ Church Oxford. His early work is not important, though his *Friendship in Fashion* was quite a success when it was first performed. When in 1749 it was revived at Drury Lane, it was hissed off the stage for its gross indecency.

Otway cherished an overwhelming but unrequited passion for Mrs. Elizabeth Barry, and embittered by her coquettish scorn, he enlisted in the army that was sent to Holland in 1678. Returning to London in the following year, almost penniless and in tattered clothes, he settled down to write what proved to be his best works : *The Orphan* and *Venice Preserved*. He died destitute in 1685 at the age of thirty-three, and was buried in the churchyard of St. Clement Danes.

Some mention must be made of Sir George Etherege [1634?-1691?], though not because his work has any great literary value. He was almost unknown until his *Comical Revenge, or Love in a Tub* was produced by the Duke's Company in 1664. This play is important because it was the first English prose comedy. It was a great success and ensured the production a few years later of his *She Would if She Could*, which drew from our friend Pepys the exclamation "Lord! how full the house and how silly the play." Etherege's most successful play was *The Man of Mode, or Sir Fopling Flutter* [1676].

Sir George can best be described as a witty, handsome seducer ; and if more were known about his private life, it would not make a very pretty story. He had a passionate affair with Mrs. Barry, who bore him a daughter, and after many years of quite ruthless wenching in London, married a fortune and got a knighthood. Some historians say that he married the fortune so that he could buy the knighthood ; others that he bought the knighthood so that he could marry the fortune. In any case, it doesn't really matter. "Gentle George," as he was called, found favour at court, secured one or two attractive appointments that enabled him to dabble in diplomacy—what little work there was he delegated to one or two personal servants—and eventually died in Paris.

Another master of polite obscenity with talent as a dramatist was William Wycherley [1640-1716]. He was born at Clive, near Shrewsbury, educated in France (because of Cromwell) and Oxford, and became a professional gentleman of the most precious variety. With his first play *Love in a Wood* he won the favour of the Duchess of Cleveland, the King's mistress. Most of his time was spent in the pursuit of pleasure, and in middle age he married the widowed Countess of Drogheda, who obligingly died after a while and left him her fortune. To his dismay, the title to the property was disputed, and after lengthy and extremely costly litigation, Wycherley found himself in prison for debt. He stayed there for

seven years, and then James II secured his release and gave him a pension of two hundred pounds a year. When finally he inherited his family property, he married, at the age of seventy-five, a young girl to spite his nephew, who was the next in succession.

Wycherley's best plays are *The Country Wife* and *The Plain Dealer*. In the latter he painted a vivid picture of the vicious life he knew so well in London: it is a masterpiece of repartee.

William Congreve [1670-1729] is generally considered to be the greatest English master of comedy. He was born of an ancient family at Bardsey, near Leeds. Because his father was sent to Ireland to command the garrison at Youghal, he was educated at Kilkenny School and Trinity College, Dublin, a fellow student of Swift at both institutions. Later, the family moved to Staffordshire, and it was probably there that Congreve wrote *The Old Bachelor*.

He entered the Middle Temple as a law student in 1691, and while he was there his comedy *The Old Bachelor* was first produced at Drury Lane, winning the generous praises of Dryden, who said he had never seen such an excellent first play. In the following year, 1694, he wrote *The Double Dealer*, which again drew the acclamation of Dryden, but which was not much of a success in the theatre because it scandalized a certain section of the ladies.

Congreve was always flattered in high society, and it was rumoured that he had been secretly married to Mrs. Bracegirdle. He was also a great favourite of the second Duchess of Marlborough. When Voltaire visited him towards the end of his life, he was disgusted to find that Congreve desired to be regarded as a gentleman rather than an author.

His crowning success was *Love for Love* [1695] produced at the opening of the new theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Its scathing wit has again been proved in modern times, having been revived in both New York and London during the second world war.

Congreve signed a contract to supply the Lincoln's Inn theatre with a new play every year, but owing to ill health, his intention was never carried out. He attempted a tragedy *The Mourning Bride* in 1697, and it was a great success. This play contains the familiar lines, "Music has charms to soothe a savage breast," and

"Heaven has no rage, like love to hatred turned,  
Nor hell a fury, like a woman scorned"

In 1700 Congreve wrote his masterpiece, *The Way of the World*, but to his utter amazement this wonderful comedy with its truly

brilliant dialogue was coldly received ; and it is said that in his disgust and anger he rushed on to the stage and vehemently upbraided the audience. It was undoubtedly this deplorable lack of appreciation that made him decide to write no more plays.

In 1705 he associated himself with Vanbrugh in the management of the Queen's Theatre, but still retained an interest in the Lincoln's Inn house until persistent gout made him retire altogether from theatre management. He died on January 19th, 1729, as a result of an injury sustained when his carriage was overturned on a journey to Bath ; and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Another great dramatist of the Restoration period was George Farquhar, who was born in Londonderry in 1678, educated locally in the first instance, and then entered Trinity College, Dublin, as a sizar when he was sixteen. It is said that he was later expelled for making a profane jest, but this cannot be proved. He joined a company of strolling players and eventually became a favourite on the Dublin stage, where he is said to have appeared as Othello. He accidentally wounded a fellow actor during a fencing scene in *The Indian Emperor* (Dryden), and it was doubtless the ill-feeling caused by this that made him come to London. In 1703 he married a lady who posed as an heiress, but discovered immediately after the ceremony that she possessed nothing. He died in poverty in 1707.

One of his earliest plays, *The Constant Couple*, was made a great success by Robert Wilks as Sir Harry Wildair, and consequently he wrote a sequel, using the name of that character as its title. Wilks again played the lead with the beautiful Anne Oldfield as Lady Lurewell, but with rather less success. Farquhar's two best plays are undoubtedly *The Recruiting Officer* (1706) and *The Beaux' Stratagem*, a rollicking comedy.

## Chapter IV

### THE CIBBER PERIOD

WE now come to what is often called "The Cibber Period"; the first part of the eighteenth century. It covers roughly thirty years.

The unpleasantness caused by Christopher Rich was probably responsible for Sir John Vanbrugh's decision to build a grand new theatre in the Haymarket. According to Cibber he persuaded "thirty persons of quality" to subscribe a hundred pounds each "in consideration whereof every subscriber for his own life was to be admitted to whatever entertainments should be publicly performed there, without further payment for his entrance."

The new Queen's Theatre, as it was called, was completed in 1705, and attracted Betterton and his colleagues from Lincoln's Inn Fields. They placed themselves under the direction of Vanbrugh and Congreve, but the new playhouse was a bitter disappointment to them: it was a triumph of impressive architecture and handsome ornament, but an appalling building for acoustics. In *The London Stage*, H. B. Baker says "At the first opening, the flat ceiling, that is now over the orchestra, was then a semi-oval arch that sprang fifteen feet higher from above the cornice. The ceiling over the pit, too, was still more raised, being one level line from the highest back part of the upper gallery to the front of the stage; the front boxes were a continual semi-circle to the bare walls of the house on each side. This extraordinary and superfluous space occasioned such an undulation from the voice of every actor that generally what they said sounded like the gabbling of so many people in the lofty aisles of a cathedral . . . the articulate sounds of a speaking voice were drowned by the hollow reverberations of one word upon another."

Congreve was quick to see the hopelessness of the situation, and retired forthwith, so Vanbrugh let the theatre to Owen Swiney, one of Rich's associates, who converted it into an opera house in which Nicolini's famous company achieved great success.

The quarrels and intrigues that centred around Rich in time brought about the closing of the Theatre Royal, but soon after

Rich had been deprived of his rights in the patent, William Collier, a member of Parliament, obtained a licence to re-open the theatre. H. B. Baker tells us ". . . as the old patentee refused to give up possession, Collier employed people to force an entrance, but only to find that Rich had previously removed everything portable in the shape of dresses and properties."

Collier's venture was not a success, but he was fortunate in finding Cibber, Dogget and Wilks ready to take it off his hands. But before we go on, let me say something about these three men.

Colley Cibber was born in Bloomsbury, London, on November 6th, 1671, son of Caius Cibber, the sculptor. He was educated at Grantham School, Lincolnshire, and came to London to find an immediate and irresistible attraction towards the stage. After a short period in the army, he haunted the Theatre Royal in the hope of obtaining membership of the united companies there. At last, when he was nineteen, he was given a very minor part in which he had to take a message to Betterton. He was overjoyed, but at the performance was suddenly stricken with stage fright and caused a general confusion. Betterton was very angry, and told the prompter afterwards to see that the young man paid a forfeit. The prompter explained that as "Master Colley" received no salary this could not be done. Betterton immediately retorted "Why then, put him down for ten shillings a week and forfeit him five shillings." That, it is said, is how Colley Cibber began his career in the theatre.

In time he rose to fifteen shillings a week, and after playing Lord Touchwood in *The Double Dealer*, he drew a word of praise from Congreve which increased his salary to a pound a week. Cibber was not a great actor, but he had some literary ability, and wrote a number of plays including *Love's Last Shift* and *The Careless Husband*. In the former, the character Sir Novelty Fashion, a caricature of a typical dandy of that time, was a source of great delight to the playgoers, and induced Sir John Vanbrugh to write a sequel called *The Relapse*.

A good-natured man, liberally endowed with commonsense, tact and business acumen, he was the ideal theatre manager, as we shall see shortly.

Robert Wilks [1655-1732] was born in Ireland of a Worcestershire family, and began his career in Dublin. As a young man he came to London, but his progress under Rich was not rapid enough to satisfy him, so he returned to Dublin to make his name. He became so highly esteemed in Ireland that when he again pro-

posed to move to London, the Duke of Ormond, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, tried to prevent his leaving the country. However, Wilks and his wife slipped out and travelled to London with Farquhar, who wrote *The Constant Couple* especially to create the character of Sir Harry Wildair for Wilks. The play was a great success, chiefly through Wilks's splendid acting, and firmly established its author's reputation.

Wilks was a born actor. "To beseech gracefully, to approach respectfully, to pity, to mourn, to love, are the places wherein Wilks may be made to shine with the utmost beauty," said Steele.

Thomas Dogget was also an Irishman. Nothing is known of his early life, but he joined a travelling company and made his way to London when he was quite a young man. It appears that he first played at Drury Lane in 1691 in D'Urfey's *Love for Money*. H. B. Baker in *The London Stage* says "he chiefly shone in old men and characters of low life, he was the original of Fondlewife in Congreve's *Old Bachelor*, and Ben in the same author's *Love for Love*. He had a passion for speculating on the Stock Exchange and was so enthusiastic a Whig that in his will he left a sum of money for a coat and badge to be annually rowed for by the Thames watermen on the first of August, to celebrate the accession of the House of Hanover."

There you have the three original members of the Cibber, Wilks and Dogget partnership. Dogget being an extremely shrewd, miserly financier, became the treasurer.

It is significant that as soon as this triumvirate became the proprietors and managers, Drury Lane entered upon a period of twenty years prosperity. "In the twenty years we were our own directors," Cibber records, "we never had a creditor that had occasion to come twice for his bill; every Monday morning discharged us of all demands before we took a shilling for our own use. And from this time we neither asked any actor, nor were desired by them, to sign any agreement whatsoever. The rate of their respective salaries were only enlisted in our daily pay roll, which plain record everyone looked upon as good as city security."

At that time a great new tragedian was making his name: Barton Booth. He appeared at Drury Lane in the title rôle at the first performance of Addison's *Cato*, and created such a sensation that Lord Bolingbroke used his influence to secure him a share in the theatre's patent. This infuriated Dogget, who forthwith sold his share in the partnership and withdrew entirely. Booth

was therefore taken in willingly, and, if anything, the union became stronger for the change.

Barton Booth was the youngest son of a well-connected Lancashire squire, and was educated at Westminster School under Dr. Busby. He made up his mind to become an actor, but found it impossible to make a start in London, so he went to Dublin, secured an engagement for two seasons, and then came back to London to work with Betterton. His first appearance was as Maximus in *Valentian* at Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1700, where he remained playing secondary parts until in 1705 he went with Betterton to The Queen's in Haymarket. Later he transferred to Drury Lane where he made his reputation as a tragedian and successor to Betterton. He was inclined to be pompous and had little sense of humour, but was greatly respected in the more select circles. He died at Hampstead on May 10th, 1733.

This period of prosperity at Drury Lane was due partly to two excellent actresses who delighted every type of playgoer from the most intellectual and sophisticated downwards: Mrs. Oldfield and Mrs. Porter.

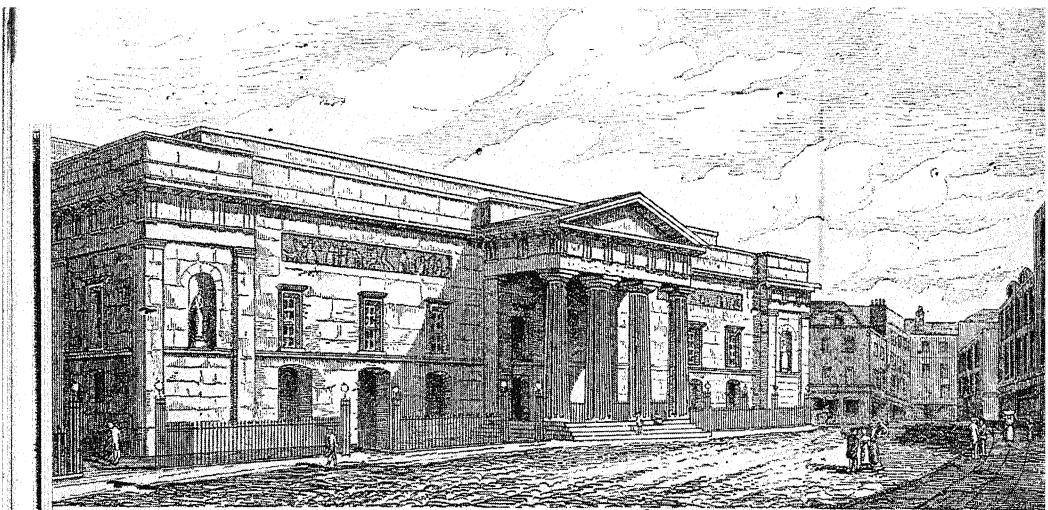
Anne Oldfield, the cleverest comedienne of her time, was born in Pall Mall in 1683, a daughter of an officer in the Guards who had squandered a small fortune and made no provision for his children. She was apprenticed to a seamstress, but caught "stage-fever" and spent all her time reading plays. With her mother she lived with an aunt who kept The Mitre Tavern in St. James's Market, and it was here that Farquhar overheard her reciting passages from *The Scornful Lady* (Beaumont and Fletcher), and spoke highly of her ability. Her mother mentioned the incident to Sir John Vanbrugh, who also frequented the tavern, and he introduced Anne to Rich at Drury Lane. In 1692 she found herself engaged at fifteen shillings a week, but she seems to have done little until 1700, when she played Aurelia in *The Perjured Husband*. Her early efforts were not always satisfactory, as we find a writer at that time concluding a criticism by referring to her as "rubbish that ought to be swept off the stage with the dust and filth." But this spiteful remark must surely have been unjustified, because in December, 1704, she triumphed gloriously in Cibber's *Careless Husband*. From that time she maintained a steady stream of successes until 1730, the year in which she died. Her last appearance was on the 28th April in that year, when she played Lady Brute in *The Provok'd Wife* (Vanbrugh). She was buried in Westminster Abbey.



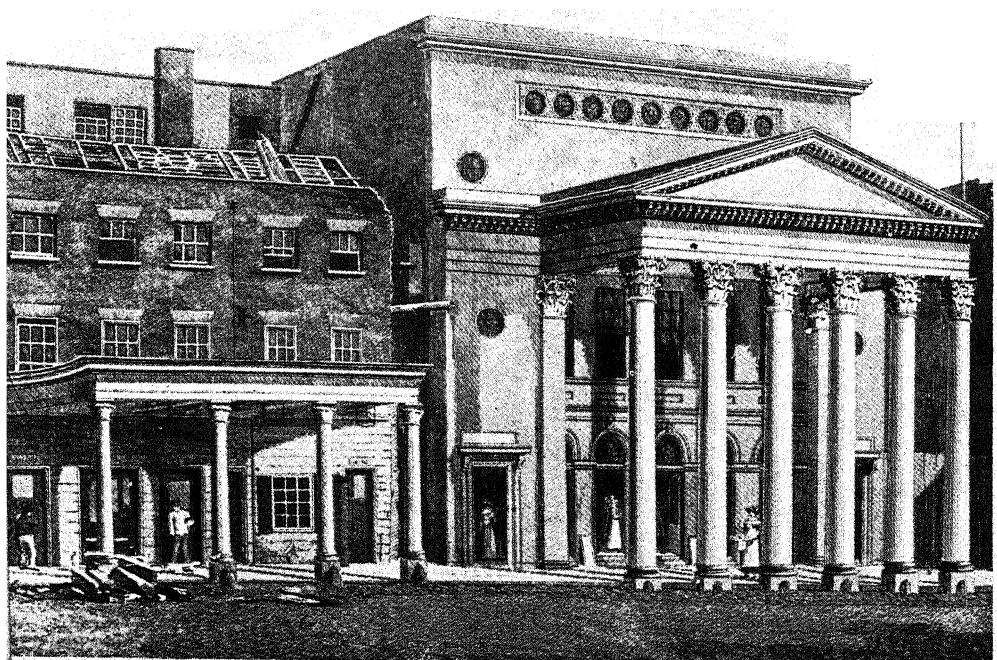
32. EDMUND KEAN as Sir Giles Over-reach in  
*A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (Massinger)



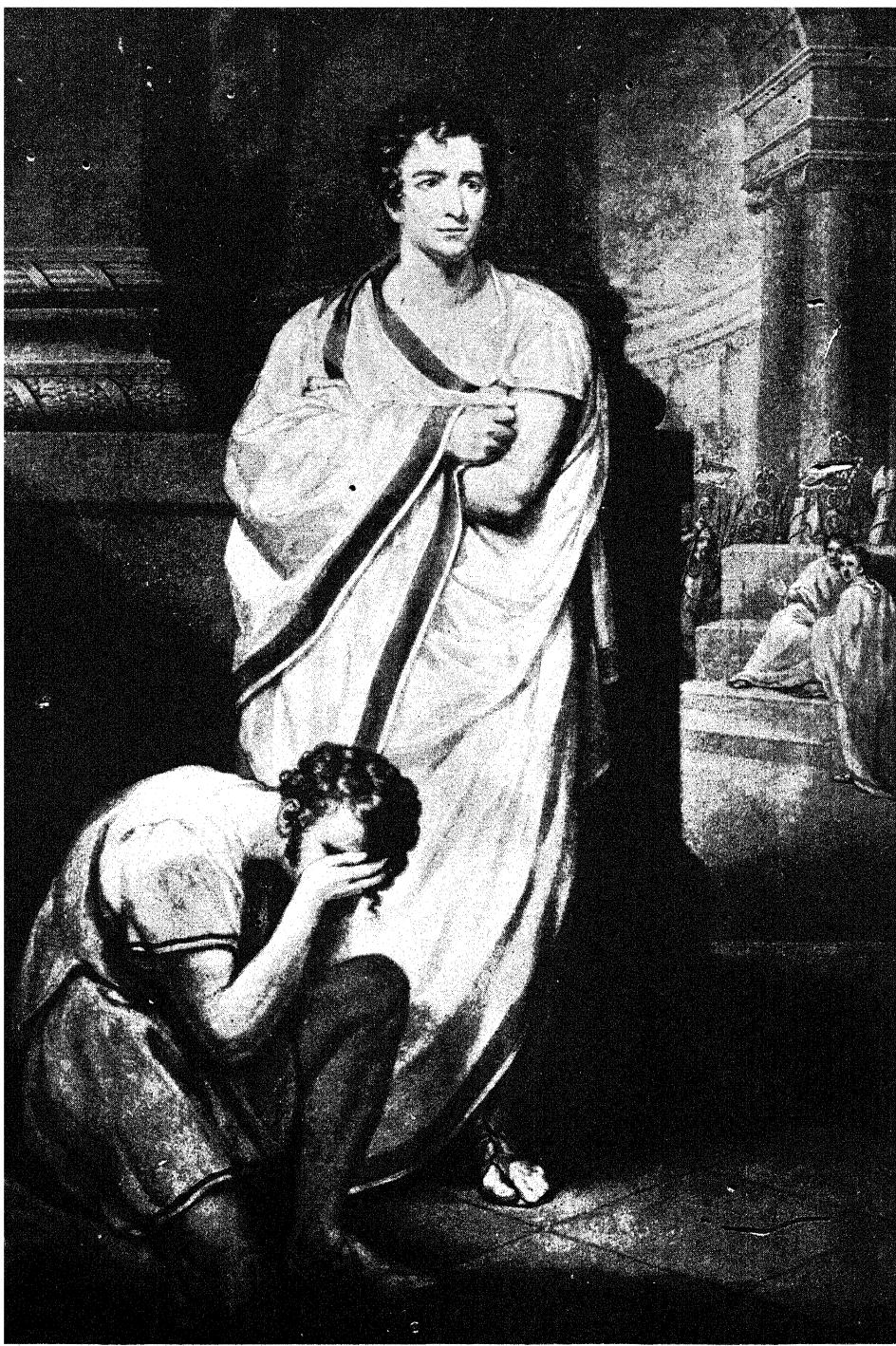
33. ROBERT WILLIAM ELLISTON, who succeeded Stephen  
Kemble in the management of the Drury Lane Theatre  
in 1819



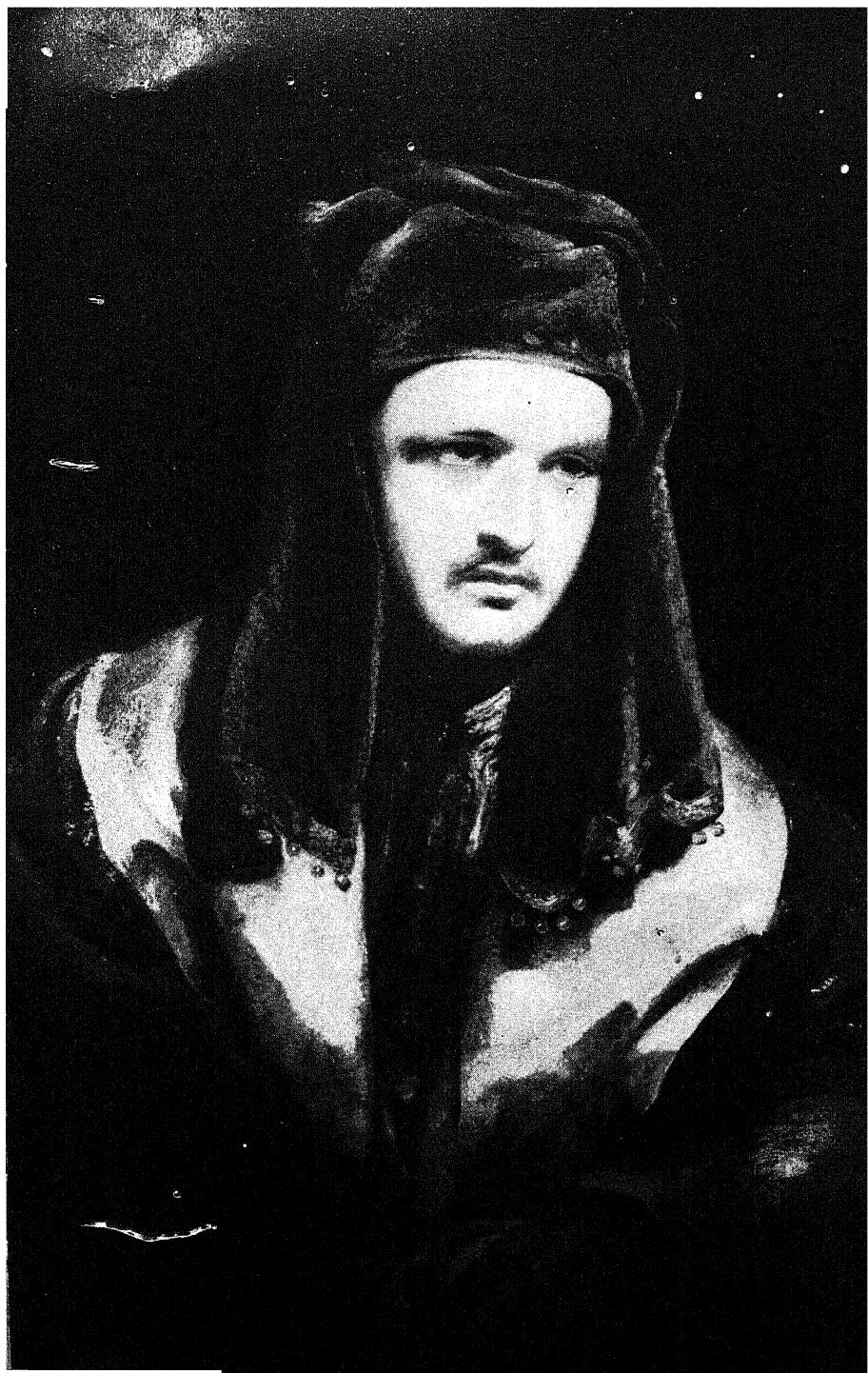
34. Covent Garden Theatre in 1809



35. The Old and New Haymarket Theatres, showing the relative position of the old theatre prior to its demolition



36. EDMUND KEAN as Brutus, after Northcote



37 WILLIAM CHARLES MACREADY by John Jackson

Mrs. Oldfield was an unusually beautiful woman, and according to Chetwood ". . . of a superior height, but with a lovely proportion; and the dignity of her soul, equal to her force and stature, made up of benevolent charity, affable and good natur'd to all that deserv'd it." She was a great favourite in fashionable circles and generally went to the theatre attended by two footmen. She had two illegitimate sons.

The date of Mary Porter's birth is unknown. She was seen as a child by Mrs. Barry and Mrs. Bracegirdle, and recommended to Betterton, who engaged her as an attendant to Mrs. Barry. It seems that she first appeared in 1699 at Lincoln's Inn Fields as Orythia in a play called *Friendship Improved*. In time she became Mrs. Barry's successor, and was acknowledged as the leading tragédienne of her time. She was not a beautiful woman, and her voice was apt to be coarse and rough, but she had a way of carrying passionate scenes to such a height of power and ardour that her audience would sit almost entranced: hence her great popularity.

She was obliged to retire from the stage for two years owing to an unfortunate accident when travelling home one night to her house near Hendon. A robber stopped her chaise, but she threatened him with a pistol and discovered that he was not a highwayman, but a poor fellow desperate through affliction. She gave him ten shillings and then whipped her horse sharply to get on her way, but the animal bolted and overthrew the chaise. Mrs. Porter's thigh-bone was dislocated, and she was afterwards compelled to support herself with a stick when on the stage.

To conclude this section, we have to return to the man whose name designates this period of theatrical history. Colley Cibber was appointed Poet Laureate in 1730, chiefly because of the Whig principles expressed in his *Nonyvor*, which was an adaptation from Molière's *Tartuffe*. This honour caused amazement and bitter resentment in Jacobite and Catholic circles, and Cibber was fiercely attacked by a number of other writers.

The days of the Cibber triumvirate drew to a close in 1732. Booth's last performance was in 1728, Mrs. Oldfield died two years later, and Wilks died in 1732, so Cibber decided to retire from management when he received an offer of three thousand pounds for his share from a gentleman amateur named Highmore.

Cibber's appearances on the stage were rare after that time, though he was far from idle, for apart from various minor activities (chiefly literary) which need not be recorded here, he published

in 1740 his famous autobiography *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber, Comedian*, a work which has been of great value to historians of the theatre.

At the age of seventy-four he made his final appearance (at Covent Garden) as Pandulph in his own *Papal Tyranny in the Reign of King John*, a wretched perversion of Shakespeare. He died on December 12th, 1757, and was buried at what used to be the Danish Church, Wellclose Square, Whitechapel.

Highmore's lack of experience in theatrical matters ruined him within a month: Cibber's worthless son Theophilus stirred up a revolt among the players, and they all left, declaring that they could not be bought and sold like slaves. Highmore was helpless, for the actors had no contracts, and could walk out without notice of any kind, so he sold out at a great sacrifice to Charles Fleetwood, a rich young man who succeeded in collecting an indifferent crowd of old and new players and carrying on.

Fleetwood, a dishonourable gambler, allowed the standard of dramatic art at Drury Lane to sink to an appallingly low level, and for the next eight or nine years it ceased to be of any importance in the theatrical world.

#### LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS

When Christopher Rich was driven from Drury Lane he at once started to rebuild the old theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields, but did not live to see the completion of this venture, and it was his son John who opened the new house on December 8th, 1714. It was a 'handsome building, the interior superbly adorned with mirrors on each side, the stage furnished with new scenery and 'more extended' than Drury Lane.'

John Rich was in every way a different man from his father. He was kind-hearted and amiable, and though a poor actor was brilliant as a harlequin, and became a master of pantomime.

Here we come to another rather important milestone in theatrical history: the first English pantomime of any importance. This was staged early in 1723 by a dancing master named Dr. Thurmond at Drury Lane, and called *Harlequin Doctor Faustus*. John Rich accepted this as a challenge from his rivals, and at the following Christmas produced his celebrated *Necromancer: or Harlequin Executed*, the most spectacular public show of its kind ever seen in this country up to that time. The tremendous success of this established pantomime as a fixture in the calendar of the theatres.

<sup>1</sup> H. B. Baker: *The London Stage* 120.

Another important date was January 29th, 1728, when Rich produced the first performance of *The Beggar's Opera*, that famous old ballad opera that has been played down through the centuries to quite recent times. The original was written by John Gay [1685-1732] the Devonshire poet and playwright who wrote his own epitaph (which may still be seen in Westminster Abbey):

"Life is a jest, and all things show it  
I thought so once, and now I know it"

The music to *The Beggar's Opera* was originally arranged by Dr. Christopher Pepusch.

Rich had already succeeded in tempting away from Drury Lane an actor who was later to save his life: James Quin. He was born either in 1692 or 1693, in King Street, Covent Garden; educated in Dublin, and in the same city made his débüt at the Smock Alley Theatre. He was engaged at Drury Lane somewhere about 1714, and after playing various minor parts scored a great success as Bajazet in Nicholas Rowe's *Tamerlane*. At Lincoln's Inn Fields he distinguished himself as Falstaff, and was recognised as the leading actor of his day—until Garrick came on the scene.

Karl Mantzius said of him <sup>1</sup> "Like his predecessor Barton Booth, he considered imperturbable dignity, regular declamation, never interrupted by a smile or an impulsive movement, the only admissible style in tragedy. And his taste was shared by the public. . . . Outside tragedy, in comedy, and especially in private life, Quin was most jovial and humorous. Very fond of a good table and a bottle, Quin possessed the genuine, old-fashioned, broad English humour, which can neither be taught nor imitated, the same humour which renders Falstaff an incomparable and imitable character to us; . . . his performance of fat Sir John was, according to all *connoisseurs*, a masterpiece of natural comic art."

An illustration of the appalling manners of some of the nobility in those days is an incident which occurred in 1721 during a scene in *Macbeth*. A nobleman who had been given the privilege of sitting at the side of the stage had the audacity to get up and walk across the stage in front of the players to speak to a friend. John Rich remonstrated with him and received a slap across the face ~~for~~ his trouble. Rich retaliated, and a general fracas ensued. Swords were drawn, and Rich's life was saved only by Quin's prompt intervention. The nobleman and his friends retired, only to

<sup>1</sup> *A History of Theatrical Art* 369.

return later reinforced by a gang of hooligans who smashed the mirrors at the side of the proscenium, ripped open the upholstery of the seats, and tried to set fire to the stage with torches. Fortunately, before the fire began to spread, the military arrived and quelled the commotion. From that time a guard of soldiers was posted at both Lincoln's Inn Fields and Drury Lane during the performances.

### THE FIRST THEATRE AT COVENT GARDEN

In 1732 Rich abandoned his theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields because of its dilapidated condition, and having started a subscription list for the erection of a new theatre, built a handsome new house in Covent Garden. H. B. Baker says in *The London Stage* : "The house was gorgeously decorated by the Italian artist Amiconi, who painted a magnificent ceiling representing the gods banqueting in the clouds ; the scenery, said to have been very fine, was by the same artist assisted by George Lambert, a founder of the Beefsteak Club. It was but a small theatre ; from the stage to the back of the boxes the length was only fifty-one feet, and it would hold when full not more than two hundred pounds, although space was economized to such an extent that only twenty-one inches were allowed to each person. The prices of admission were : boxes five shillings, pit three shillings and six pence, galleries two shillings and one shilling, and seats on the stage ten shillings and six pence ; there were two entrances, one under the Piazza, and the other in Bow Street." The high price of seats on the stage was fixed by Rich "in order to prevent the wings from being overcrowded."

On the opening night [December 7th, 1732] Quin appeared as Fainall in Congreve's *Way of the World*, and there was such a tremendous demand for seats that the pit was put up to five shillings : an exceptionally high price for those days.

It was at this new and fashionable house at Covent Garden that Quin enjoyed most of his greatest years. He played there for the rest of his life, with the exception of seven years at Drury Lane from 1734-41. He was a serious rival of Garrick, of whom we shall hear a great deal later, and on one memorable occasion [November 14th, 1746] he played Horatio with Garrick as Lothario, and Mrs. Cibber as Calista, in *The Fair Penitent* (Rowe). The audience cheered so loudly that the players were quite disconcerted. Garrick himself admitted it, adding "Faith, I believe Quin was as much frightened as myself."

At the beginning of the 1747-8 season, Quin wrote to Rich from Bath :

“ I am at Bath.

Yours,

James Quin.”

By return he received the reply :

“ Stay there, and be damned.

Yours,

John Rich.”

In 1750 Garrick tried to tempt Quin away from Covent Garden, and although he had no intention of moving, Quin used Garrick’s offer to extort a salary of a thousand pounds a year from Rich : the greatest salary ever paid to an actor up to this time.

Quin retired in 1751 to Bath, a city he greatly admired, but returned to London on March 16th, 1752, and again on March 19th, 1753, to play Falstaff for the benefit of his old friend and colleague, Ryan. He died at his house in Bath on Tuesday, January 21st, 1766, and was buried in Bath Abbey three days later. Garrick wrote his epitaph.

#### THE “LITTLE THEATRE” IN HAYMARKET

Before we leave the early part of the eighteenth century, let us look at one or two of the other theatres in London at that time.

In 1720 a carpenter named John Potter acquired the site of an old inn called The King’s Head, in Haymarket and erected a small theatre on it between Little Suffolk Street and James Street, almost opposite The Queen’s Theatre. The Little Theatre, as it was called, opened on December 29th with the French comedy *La Fille à la Mode, ou le Badaud de Paris*, played by a company called “ The French Comedians of his Grace the Duke of Montague.”

The Little Theatre had a chequered existence, and in but a few years was being used for any kind of show : acrobats and whatnot. Not until 1730 did it suddenly come into the limelight, when Henry Fielding produced in it his famous burlesque of the leading writers of the day : *Tom Thumb, A Tragedy of Tragedies*. After that the theatre was used for several more of his works, including the sensational political and social satires that caused so much irritation to Sir Robert Walpole.

Fielding took over the management of the theatre in 1734. Three years later, another of his satires, *The Historical Register*, infuriated Sir Robert and brought about the Licensing Act [1737], though the actual play that made Walpole take action was an

anonymous effusion called *The Golden Rump*, which had been submitted to Giffard, who was then the manager at Lincoln's Inn Fields. There was more than a grain of truth in the rumour that this pernicious play was actually written by Walpole himself—or written under his auspices—because he was anxious to lay his hands upon a thoroughly libellous work which he could show in support of his demand for a limitation of theatrical liberty. Giffard received a thousand pounds “for his loyalty” (in taking the play to Walpole), but there have always been the gravest suspicions about this anonymous work which had never been performed or printed, and had never been known to any other person in the theatrical world.

As one would imagine, the Licensing Act was extremely unpopular with the audiences, for not only did it jeopardize the existence of The Little Theatre and another small playhouse that had been built in 1729 (Goodman's Fields), but it gave an advantage to the French companies that were trying to take possession of the London stage.

The people's feelings were displayed in no uncertain manner when in 1738 a French company was billed to appear at this small Haymarket theatre. The authorities, anticipating a disturbance, sent a detachment of soldiers with a Westminster magistrate to keep order. As soon as the curtain rose, the audience found that the military had been posted actually on the stage, and with one accord they turned on the magistrate and demanded the removal of the soldiers. The magistrate thought it best for his own safety to respect the wish of the audience, and dismissed the guard, but immediately the players began to speak, their words were drowned by hisses and cat-calls. Finally the actors were pelted with peas.

#### THE OPERA AT HAYMARKET

Now we go over to the other side of the Haymarket where, it will be recalled Sir John Vanbrugh built an expensive new theatre in 1705 which proved acoustically a failure. It was originally named The Queen's, but it was also known as Her Majesty's, and later The King's. I mention this because these additional names are apt to be misleading.

When Owen Swiney took it over from Vanbrugh, he arranged that it should be devoted primarily to opera, and it was here that Italian opera was first established in England, although *Arsinoë* (Motteaux) had been performed at Drury Lane in 1705. Several principals were brought over from Italy, but it was not long before

a number of English singers distinguished themselves at The Queen's.

Mrs. Katherine Tofts, for instance, might be called the first English prima donna. She was born about 1680 and took part in *Arsinoë* at Drury Lane. One of her most notable performances was in Scarlatti's *Pyrrhus and Demetrius* at Haymarket in December, 1708. Cibber in his *Apology* said of her: "The beauty of her fine-proportioned figure, the exquisitely sweet silver tone of her voice, with that peculiar rapid swiftness of her throat, were perfections not to be imitated by art or labour."

Nicolini came to England in 1708, appeared in *Pyrrhus and Demetrius*, and was acclaimed to be the first truly great singer that had ever sung in a theatre. He was engaged by Swiney for three years at a salary of eight hundred guineas a year.

Two years later an even greater musician arrived in this country, the illustrious George Frederic Handel [1685-1759], who at once set to work on his opera *Rinaldo*. He finished it in fourteen days, and it was produced lavishly by Aaron Hall at The Queen's, on February 24th, 1711. It was an enormous success, though the *Spectator* found it all very amusing:

"How would the wits of King Charles's time have laughed to have seen Nicolini exposed to a tempest in robes of ermine, and sailing in an open boat upon a sea of pasteboard. What a field of railly would they have been let into had they been entertained with painted dragons spitting wildfire, enchanted chariots drawn by Flanders mares, and real cascades in artificial landskips. . . ."

Handel brought the famous soprano Faustina to London in 1726. She made her début on May 5th, in his *Alessandro*, and for two seasons was a rival to Cuzzoni. Francesca Cuzzoni had come to London in 1722 and first appeared as Teofane in Handel's *Ottone*. It is said that at the rehearsal she refused to sing the first air in this opera because she disliked it, but Handel was having no nonsense: he picked her up by the waist and said that unless she agreed to sing it he would throw her out of the window. She then submitted, and it was that very air that established her reputation in London. She became a great favourite in the opera house.  In one of her performances, a man in the gallery was so moved by her singing of a high warbling passage that he exclaimed during a moment's pause for all to hear "Damn her: she's got a nest of nightingales in her belly!" Cuzzoni fell upon hard times in later

years when her voice failed her. She was obliged to earn money by making buttons, and she died in poverty in 1770 at Bologna.

During the reign of George I the theatre became known as The King's Theatre, and in 1720 a Royal Academy of Music was established in connection with it, chiefly to supply musicians for the opera, but a series of financial failures ensued and after a loss of about fifty thousand pounds in seven years, the Academy was closed in 1728.

Observing that the public interest in opera seemed to be waning, Handel wrote the oratorio *Esther*, which was first performed in the King's Theatre. It should be noted that this was the first oratorio to be heard in England. Shortly afterwards his *Acis and Galatea* was sung on the same stage with equal success.

Another sensation was caused in 1734 when Carlo Farinelli came to England. He was a castrato soprano, and possessed the finest voice in the world at the time. Born in Naples in 1705, he was involved in a riding accident when a boy, and this necessitated the peculiar operation which enabled him to retain his fine soprano voice. He became one of the wonders of the world, because he possessed not only a voice that would eclipse an entire orchestra in power and beauty of tone, but exceptional musicianship as well.

At his first rehearsal in London the members of the orchestra stopped playing as soon as he began to sing, and gasped in amazement: they had never known such a voice. He received a salary of fifteen thousand pounds a year for singing in the opera here, and some idea of the prestige he enjoyed may be gathered from a report <sup>1</sup> that a lady who generally occupied a box used to say: "One God and one Farinelli."

Handel retired from opera in 1741, and in the same year the Earl of Middlesex took over the management of the King's Theatre.

#### SADLER'S WELLS

In 1683 an ancient well was discovered by some workmen who were digging in a Clerkenwell garden owned by a man named Sadler. While the men continued to unearth the discovery their employer made investigations and found that the well contained chalybeate water, and was none other than the long lost well that had been the property of Clerkenwell Priory, and to which the most miraculous cures had been attributed.

Sadler was quick to see the possibilities of making money out of the well, because at Tunbridge Wells and Epsom the medicinal

<sup>1</sup> Hogarth: *The Rake's Progress*.



38. SAMUEL PHELPS



39. MARIE WILTON (LADY BANCROFT)



II. DAVID GARRICK as Richard III, from the painting  
by Nathaniel Dance in the Town Hall at Stratford-upon-  
Avon



waters were being made the source of a princely revenue. So he exploited the discovery to the utmost, and in but a couple of weeks people with rheumatism and allied complaints, and those with purely imaginary illnesses, were flocking in their hundreds to partake of the waters.

Fortunately, Sadler's grounds were fairly extensive, so he proceeded to enclose the gardens, to lay them out tastefully, instal a dignified marble basin into which the spring of water could run, and to provide light musical entertainment for his visitors, who now numbered something like five hundred a day. And he found that it was all very profitable.

In 1699 we find two partners upon the scene : James Miles and Francis Forcer, and a wooden "Musick House" catering for a very mixed crowd : certainly nothing like the genteel patrons of the early days. A splendid picture of this "Musick House" in 1699 is given in *The London Spy* by Ned Ward. The author and his lady were out for a walk in the fields of Clerkenwell, and decided to visit Sadler's Wells :

" We enter'd the house, were conducted upstairs,  
 There lovers o'er cheesecakes were seated by pairs,  
 The organs and fiddles were scraping and humming,  
 The guests for more ale on the tables were drumming ;  
 Whilst others, ill-bred, lolling over their mugs,  
 Were laughing and toying with their fans and their jugs,  
 Disdain'd to be slaves to perfections, or graces,  
 Sat puffing tobacco in their mistresses' faces.  
 Some 'prentices, too, who made a bold venture  
 And trespass'd a little beyond their indenture,  
 Were each of them treating his mistress's maid,  
 For letting him in when his master's abed."

Ward goes on to describe the pit :

" Where butchers and bailiffs and such sort of fellows,  
 Were mix'd with a vermin train'd up to the gallows,  
 As buttocks and files, housebreakers and padders,  
 With prizefighters, sweet'ners, and such sort of traders,  
 Informers, thief-takers, deer-stealers and bullies ;  
 Some dancing, some skipping, some ranting and tearing,  
 Some drinking and smoking, some lying and swearing,  
 And some with the tapsters were got in a fray,  
 Who without paying reck'ning were stealing away."

Miles died in 1724 and the management passed to Forcer's son,

a barrister, who provided a better type of entertainment, and succeeded in attracting a more fashionable class of patron. As a Spa, too, it continued to flourish, and in 1735 Princess Amelia went there with Princess Caroline to take the waters, so for several years thereafter the nobility made it a favourite resort.

In 1743 the gardens passed to a man called Rosoman, and once again Sadler's Wells began to decline. Referring to it in his *Memoirs of Macklin*, Kirkman says :

" I remember when the price of admission here was but three-pence, except a few places scuttled off at the sides of the stage at sixpence, and which were usually reserved for people of fashion who occasionally came to see the fun. Here we smoked and drank porter, or rum and water, as much as we could pay for, and every man had his doxy (a common loose wench) that liked it, and so forth ; and though we had a mixture of very odd company, for I believe it was the baiting place of thieves and highwaymen, there was but little or no rioting. Some hornpipes and ballad singing, with a kind of pantomimic ballet, and some lofty tumbling. . . . "

For the next twenty years Sadler's Wells provided only the lowest types of entertainment, with the exception of pantomimes, so for the present we leave it.

#### EARLY EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY DRAMATISTS

Before we go further, we must consider a few of the leading dramatists of this period.

Joseph Addison [1672-1719] can scarcely be regarded as a dramatist because he wrote only two plays : - *Cato* and *The Drummer, or The Haunted House*. The former is of considerable importance, but the latter, a mediocre comedy, was a failure.

Sir Richard Steele was born in Dublin in the same year as Addison, and was educated with him at Charterhouse. He proceeded to Oxford and then entered the Life Guards. His fine comedy *The Christian Hero* was produced in 1701, and was notable in that it broke away from the general licentiousness of the Restoration period, but neither this nor its two successors pleased the public. So he turned to journalism and politics, becoming M.P. for Stockbridge in 1713. In the following year he was expelled from the House on account of his Hanoverian tendencies, but with the accession of George I he came back into favour and was appointed to various offices, one of which gave him the supervision of the Drury Lane theatre. He was knighted in 1715. His last

play, *The Conscious Lovers*, based on the *Andria* of Terence, was his best work for the stage. He died at Carmarthen in 1729.

Another writer whose plays were of a high moral tone was Nicholas Rowe, who was born at Little Barford, Bedfordshire, in 1674. He was educated at a private school in Highgate and then went as a King's Scholar to Westminster in 1688. In due course he entered the Middle Temple as a law student, and although he was later called to the bar and found favour with the Lord Chief Justice, he preferred to become a dramatist. His father died in 1692 and left him an income of three hundred pounds a year, which enabled him to abandon his legal career.

Rowe made the acquaintance of Addison and Pope and soon established himself as a playwright. His poetical works include a fine translation of Lucan [1718] and one of his more important achievements was his edition of Shakespeare's plays, published in 1709. On August 1st, 1715, he was made Poet Laureate in succession to Nahum Tate. Rowe failed at comedy, but his tragedies were very well received, notably *Tamerlane* [1702], *The Fair Penitent* [1704], adapted from Massinger's *Fatal Dowry*, and *Jane Shore* [1714]. He died on December 6th, 1718 and was buried in the Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey.

The poet James Thomson did not concern himself with writing for the stage until he was nearly thirty years of age. He was born at Ednam, on the Scottish border, in September, 1700, and went to school at Jedburgh Abbey, passing on to Edinburgh University in due course. He decided upon a literary career and came to London in 1725. He had been scarcely a day in the capital when a pickpocket stole his various letters of introduction; but nevertheless, he was able to make valuable contacts. After several encouraging successes as a poet, he wrote his first play *Sophonisba*, and had it produced at Drury Lane. Certain revisions had to be made before long because it contained the slightly ridiculous line:

“O Sophonisba, Sophonisba O!”

—and every wit in London wrote some sort of parody on it. Fielding could not resist the temptation, for in his *Tom Thumb* he put:

“Oh! Huncamunca, Huncamunca, Oh!”

For all this, Thomson was not perturbed, and continued writing with considerable success. He collaborated with David Mallet in the writing of the masque *Alfred*, which contains the famous song *Rule, Britannia*.

Thomson's last plays were *Tancred* and *Sigismunda*, produced at Drury Lane in 1745 with Garrick as Tancred; and *Coriolanus*, staged posthumously at Covent Garden in January, 1749, with Quin in the leading part. He died on August 27th, 1748, and was buried in Richmond Parish Church.

Henry Fielding, the author of the famous novel *Tom Jones*, began his literary career as a playwright. He was born at Sharpham Park, near Glastonbury, Somerset, on April 22nd, 1707, and was educated at Eton. We are told that he "threw himself recklessly into the pleasures of London life" and supported himself by writing for the stage—chiefly comedies. Then he went to Leyden to study law, but returned after a while because of "a failure of remittances." Returning to play-writing in London, he found a steady demand for his comedies, farces and burlesques, but wrote too hastily to produce anything of great literary value. I have already referred to the outcome of the production of his *Tom Thumb* at the Little Theatre. Swift greatly admired this play, remarking that he had only laughed twice in his life, and that one of the two occasions was at *Tom Thumb*.

Fielding gave up play-writing at the age of thirty, and spent the rest of his life in trying to earn a steady income to support his family, having married Charlotte Craddock in 1734. He entered the Middle Temple, and was called to the bar in 1740. Four years later his wife died, and after three years as a widower he married her maid Mary Daniel.

Political journalism appealed strongly to Fielding, and ultimately with the help of Lord Lyttelton, he was made a justice of the peace for Westminster and did a great deal to suppress robbery in the neighbourhood. His great novel *Tom Jones*, described by himself as "the labour of some years of my life" was published in 1749, and his *Amelia* followed two years later.

In 1753 he became seriously ill, and in the following year had to make a voyage to Portugal, in the hope that the warmer climate would improve his condition, but he died at Lisbon on October 8th, 1754, after a stay of about two months, and was buried in the English cemetery there.

## Chapter V

### DAVID GARRICK

GARRICK was born on February 19th, 1717, at the Angel Inn, Lichfield, where his father, Captain Peter Garrick, who had married the daughter of a vicar-choral of the cathedral, was conducting a recruiting campaign. He was educated first at the Lichfield Grammar School, but in the summer of 1736 was sent with his brother George to the "academy" at Edial, which had just been opened by Samuel Johnson. After about six months this school closed, and Garrick left Lichfield with Johnson (who was seven years his senior) to come to London: the latter "with twopence halfpenny in his pocket" and the former "with three-halfpence in his."

With a legacy of a thousand pounds from an uncle, Garrick went into partnership with his brother Peter in a wine merchant's business, opening a branch of the original Lichfield concern in Durham Yard, Adelphi. But residence in London turned his interest in the theatre into an overwhelming passion, and he made up his mind to become an actor. He took part in amateur performances at St. John's Gate, Clerkenwell; wrote dramatic criticisms, and in a surprisingly short time succeeded in getting a play accepted for production at Drury Lane. It was a satirical revue called *Lethe*, or *Æsop in the Shades*. Haunting the theatres, he made contact with actors and managers whenever he had the chance, but it seemed almost impossible to get a start.

Opportunity came at last. One evening he was behind the scenes at Goodman's Fields when Yates, who was taking the part of Harlequin in a pantomime called *Harlequin Student*, was taken ill suddenly and asked Garrick if he could take his place incognito. Thus Garrick's first appearance on the stage was an unofficial one in March, 1741. Then he got an opportunity to join a small company going to Ipswich, and played under the name of Lyddal, gaining sufficient experience to enable him to make his débüt at Goodman's Fields on the following October 9th as Richard III.

This theatre had been closed on account of the Licensing Act

[1737], but the manager had found a way of evading the law by presenting "A Concert of Vocal and Instrumental Music, divided into Two Parts" and giving a play *gratis* between the first and second half! The playbill announcing the concert on October 9th proclaimed that the part of King Richard would be played by a "Gentleman who had never appeared on any stage."

The unnamed "Gentleman" caused the biggest sensation the theatre had known for many a year. Playgoers crowded night after night into the hitherto unfashionable Goodman's Fields Theatre to see this masterly young actor whose fire and passion could hold them spellbound. The press duly reflected the wonder and delight of the audiences, and within a week all London was bubbling with excitement. Pope declared "That young man never had a rival and never will. . . ." William Pitt proclaimed that Garrick was the only actor in England, and "a dozen dukes a night," it was said, could be found in the house.

The critics, though full of praise, were puzzled; for Garrick's technique was something quite new. Quin declared that if Garrick were right, then he and all the other actors were wrong. For the theatrical profession generally, it was all very disconcerting.

Garrick, finding that he had lost five hundred pounds in the wine business, wrote to his brother without further delay asking to be released from the partnership. Then he threw himself utterly and completely into the work he loved. He played in one of Cibber's comedies, produced a farce of his own, *The Lying Valet*, played Lothario in *The Fair Penitent*, the Ghost in *Hamlet*, and Fondlewife in Congreve's *Old Bachelor*, scoring a fresh triumph every time. His versatility was phenomenal.

The extent to which people forsook Drury Lane and Covent Garden for Goodman's Fields so alarmed the managers of the larger theatres that they sought the help of Sir John Bernard to enforce the Licensing Act, and succeeded in closing their little rival theatre again on May 27th, 1742.

Garrick was then engaged by Fleetwood for Drury Lane at a salary of six hundred guineas a year, but before starting there he went on a short visit to Dublin, where his success, according to Hitchcock in his *Correct View of the Irish Stage* "exceeded all imagination." Dublin, it is said, went down *en bloc* with "Garrick fever." He played there with the fascinating Peg Woffington, who was also his mistress, and to whom, we are told, he wrote the following verses :

The Sun, first rising in the morn,  
That paints the dew-bespangled Thorn,  
Does not so much the day adorn,  
As does my lovely Peggy.

While bees from Flowers to Flowers rove,  
And Linnets warble through the Grove,  
Or stately swans the waters love,  
So long shall I love Peggy.

And when Death with his Pointed Dart,  
Shall strike the blow that rends my heart,  
My words shall be when I depart,  
Adieu, my lovely Peggy.

This alluring creature had been born in Dublin to very humble parents, and had gained her first experience in a children's company. As a young woman her pretty face and voluptuous figure helped her to find employment in London, and she soon proved her ability. She lived with Garrick for several years, taking it in turn, month by month, to pay the household expenses. Garrick was decidedly parsimonious, and their guests had to become accustomed to lavish hospitality when Peg was paying, but to the most meagre victuals when it was Garrick's turn!

Peg Woffington was extremely kind-hearted and generous, but she had no moral sense whatever, and even during her years with Garrick she indulged regularly in promiscuous relations with half-a-dozen other men. For all that, she burst into a frantic rage when Garrick announced his intention of marrying somebody else. In 1757 she was playing Rosalind in *As You Like It* when she sustained a paralytic stroke and was carried screaming with terror from the stage. She died three years later and was buried at Teddington.

When Garrick returned from Dublin he was not an entire stranger at Drury Lane, for he had already made an appearance there on May 11th, 1742, as Chamont, in Otway's play *The Orphan*. Among the other players he found there were Charles Macklin, Kitty Clive and Mrs. Pritchard.

Macklin is important because it was his initiative that raised Drury Lane out of the depth of artistic decay into which it had sunk after Cibber's retirement. He was born in the north of Ireland towards the close of the seventeenth century, educated at Island Bridge, near Dublin, and became interested in amateur theatricals. He ran away from home, came to London, and at first supported

himself by serving in a public house. Then he joined a company of strolling players, gaining experience here and there until in 1725 he appeared in London playing the part of Alcander in *Oedipus* (Dryden and Lee) at Lincoln's Inn Fields. Fleetwood engaged him for Drury Lane, and his first appearance there was on October 31st, 1733, as Brazen in *The Recruiting Officer*; but the audiences continued to diminish, and in 1741, when business was about as bad as it could be, Macklin went to Fleetwood and suggested that as *The Merchant of Venice* had not been performed for forty years, he should revive it in its original form. (A spurious version by Lord Lansdowne entitled *The Jew of Venice* had been staged occasionally).

Macklin's proposal was received with astonishment and the gravest doubt, but believing that nothing could send the box-office receipts much lower, the management decided to make the experiment. Its success was sensational. Macklin, as Shylock,<sup>1</sup> "marked a new epoch in the conception of this character, and it was the climax of his own art." Instead of seeing the weak, ridiculous Shylock to whom they had become accustomed, the people now saw the true character in all his vileness. Pope summed up Macklin's triumph neatly in the couplet :

" This is the Jew  
That Shakespeare drew."

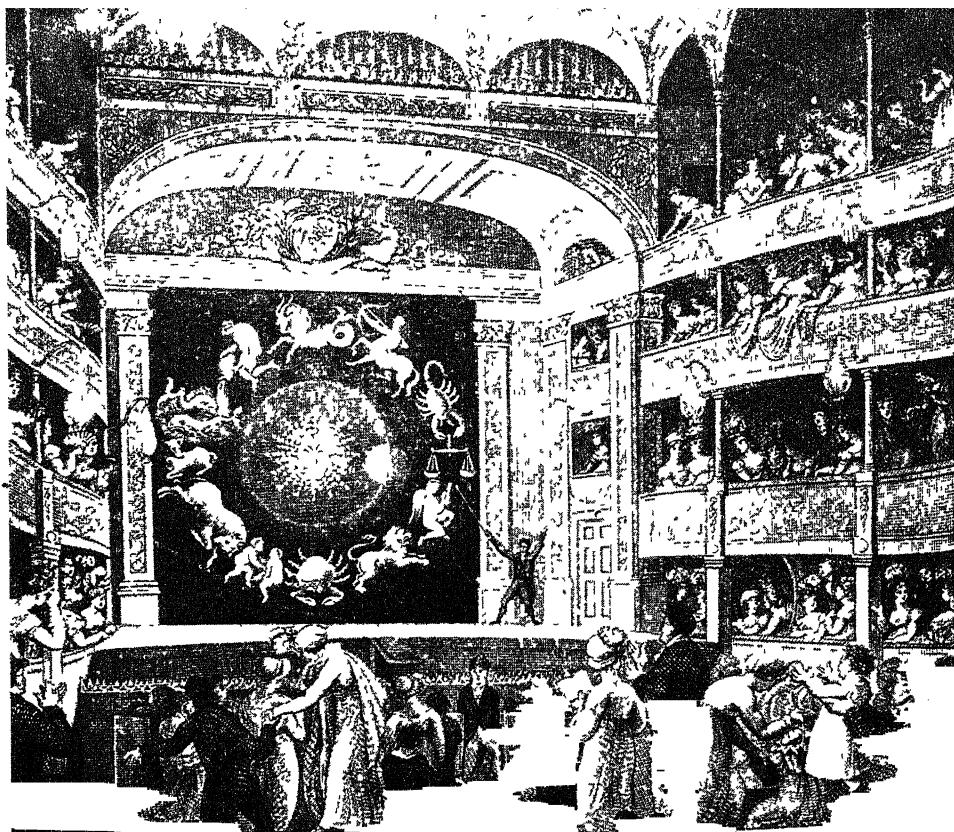
Of the early life of Kitty Clive we know little. She was the daughter of an impecunious Irish gentleman, but appears to have been in domestic service as a girl. It is said that she was singing while scrubbing the steps of a house opposite the Bell Tavern in London, and attracted the attention of the members of the Beef-steak Club, who were wont to meet in the tavern. They were so enchanted by her voice that two of them (Beard and Dunstall) mentioned her to Cibber. In 1728 she made her début as Ismenes, in Lee's *Mithridates*, and the playgoers were delighted with this spirited girl of seventeen and her fine singing voice. Later, she made a great hit in Charles Coffey's popular little opera *The Devil to Pay*, for in this her great talent for comic parody and caricature was given boundless scope. Curiously enough, although she married a barrister, George Clive, and left him within a few months, she led an entirely blameless life and always supported her aged father.

Little, too, is known of the early life of Mrs. Hannah Pritchard, except that she was born in 1711 and married a poor actor. She

<sup>1</sup> Mantzus: *History of Theatrical Art* 372.

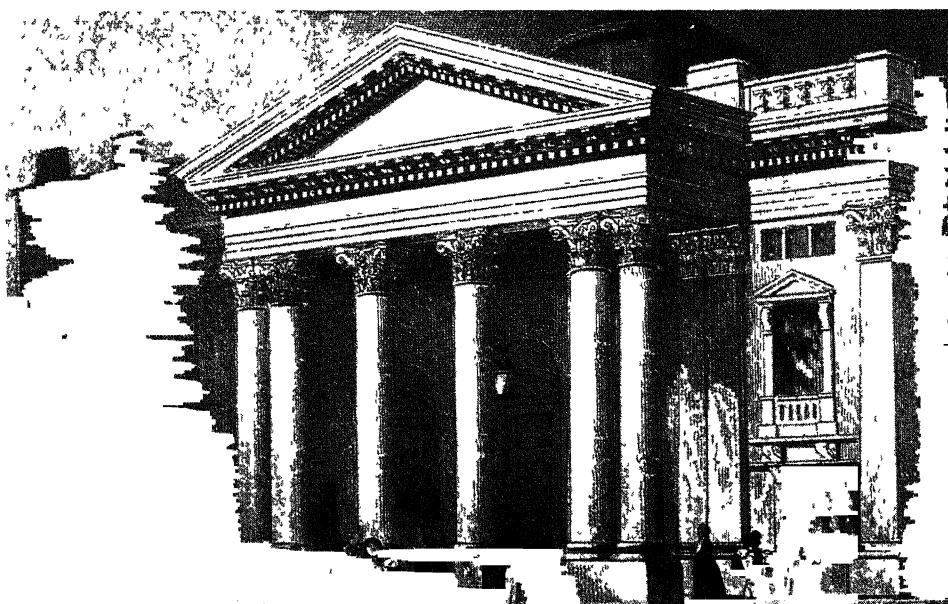


40. SIR SQUIRE BANCROFT



41. Interior of the English Opera House (Lyceum Theatre) in 1817

42. (Below) The Lyceum Theatre in 1860





43. SIR HENRY IRVING,  
after a painting by Whistler



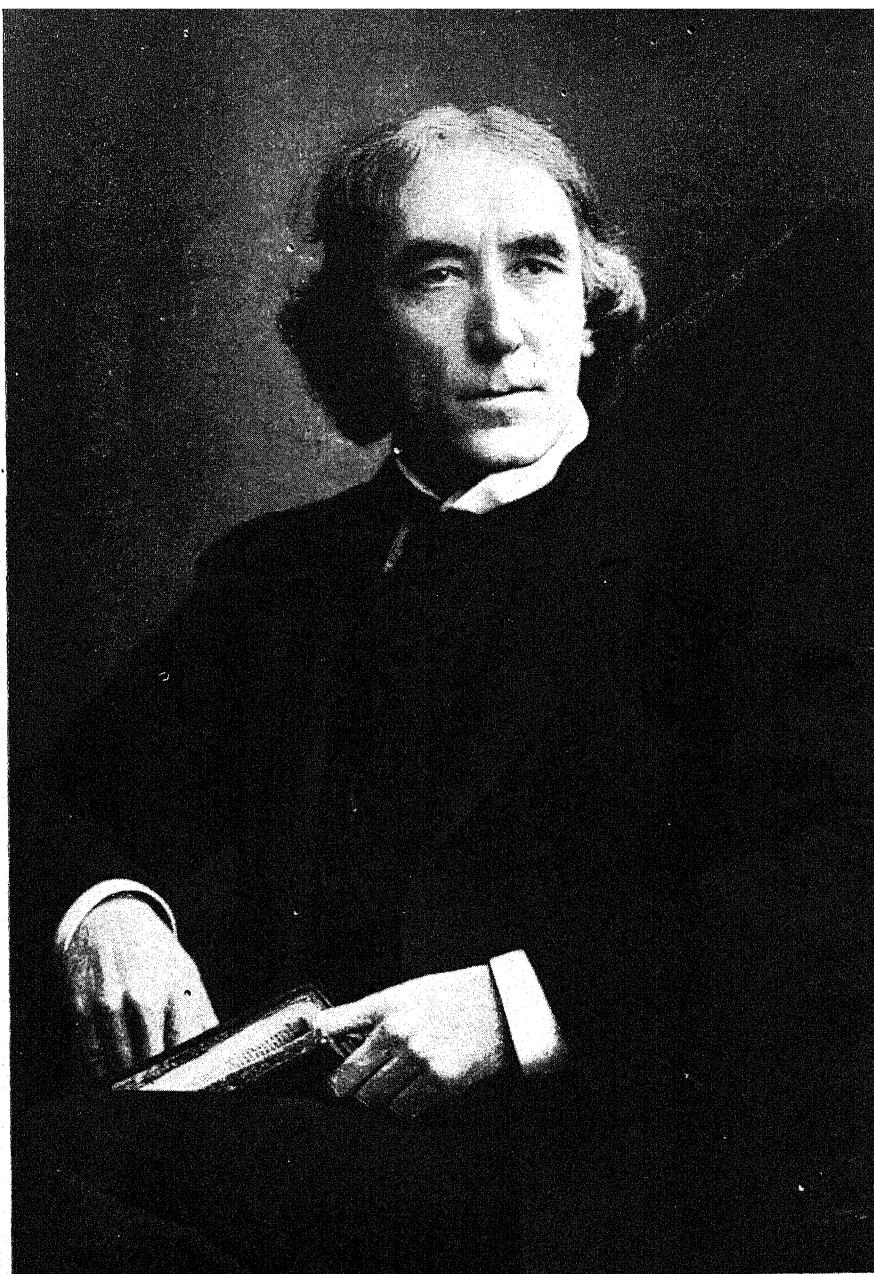
44. SIR HERBERT BEERBOHM TREE  
as Malvolio

(Below) 45. MARTIN HARVEY as Sydney Carton in *The Only Way*  
and as Dubosc in *The Lyons Mail*





46. DAME MADGE KENDAL



47. SIR HENRY IRVING



48. SIR JOHNSTON FORBES-ROBERTSON



49. SIR CHARLES HAWTREY



50. SIR HERBERT BEERBOHM TREE as King John by Charles Buchel

appeared in *The Devil to Pay*, and soon became one of the most brilliant stars of the Garrick galaxy. She was acknowledged to be the greatest Lady Macbeth of this period, but was also a conspicuous success as the Queen in *Hamlet*, although she was not a very intelligent person.

Mrs. Susannah Cibber was born in London in February, 1714, daughter of a Covent Garden upholsterer. Her brother, Thomas Arne, by the way, distinguished himself as a composer. Mrs. Cibber was musical and well read, and made her first appearance as a singer at the Haymarket in 1732 in the Lumpé opera *Amelia*. Within four years she was a musical celebrity. She was first seen as an actress in Aaron Hill's version of Voltaire's tragedy *Zaire*. One cannot help wondering what induced her to marry the contemptible Theophilus Cibber, but she soon discovered what a wretched fellow he was, and left him for another man. Cibber claimed five thousand pounds in damages, but was awarded only ten, the jury being quite capable of judging his character.

The great composer Handel was very favourably impressed by Mrs. Cibber's voice and musicianship: she was the first Galatea in his *Acis and Galatea*, and he wrote the fine contralto arias in his immortal *Messiah* expressly for her. When Dr. Delaney, friend of Dean Swift, heard her sing these, he exclaimed, "Woman, for this be all thy sins forgiven thee!" Burney remarked, "She captivated every ear by the sweetness and expression of her voice." She died in 1766 at her house in Scotland Yard, Westminster, and was buried in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey.

It did not take Garrick long to discover the innumerable deficiencies in Fleetwood's appalling management. Throughout 1743 and 1744 Drury Lane prospered solely because Macklin was able to make good some of Fleetwood's shortcomings; but the day came when the players could tolerate the management no longer, and they went to see the Lord Chamberlain in the hope of being able to obtain a licence to open in Haymarket. Alas! he refused, and there was nothing to do but to return to Fleetwood, who in his indignation refused to reinstate Macklin because he believed him to have been responsible for the revolt. Garrick offered to pay Macklin's salary out of his own pocket, but the offended Irishman refused it, and organized a riot in the theatre on the opening night of the season. Fleetwood promptly engaged gangs of toughs and bruisers who had to be present every night to deal with the rioters. After a number of disgraceful free fights in the pit, Fleetwood was compelled to re-engage Macklin.

In 1745 Garrick, dissatisfied with the conditions at Drury Lane, went to Dublin and became joint-manager with Thomas Sheridan at the Theatre Royal, Smock Alley, where there was a splendid company, including Spranger Barry and Miss George Anne Bellamy.

After a most successful season, Garrick returned to London and accepted an invitation from Rich to play at Covent Garden, where he rose to new heights of fame.

By this time, Fleetwood at Drury Lane had become so heavily in debt that his creditors forced him to sell out, and the theatre came into the hands of James Lacy, who invited Garrick to go into partnership with him. The agreement was that Lacy should control the business side, and that Garrick should become the artistic and administrative director. The latter's share cost him eight thousand pounds, and so England's greatest actor achieved his life's ambition.

#### DRURY LANE UNDER GARRICK

The new regime started on September 15th, 1746, and what a change was brought about! All the slackness and indifference disappeared overnight; punctuality at rehearsals was enforced, players were suspended if they acted their parts imperfectly, and above all, the evil practice of allowing privileged people to sit on the stage was abolished.

Garrick did a great deal to restore Shakespeare's works to their original form. *Macbeth* had been turned into a distressing form of pseudo-opera, *Romeo and Juliet* into a fatuous comedy, *The Merchant of Venice* into a cheap farce, and so forth. He changed most of this, but it is to be regretted that he failed to do so completely, and that simply to please a stupid audience, he made some deplorable alterations himself. Few can forgive, for instance, his addition of a dying speech to the text of *Macbeth*. Nevertheless, we must give him credit where it is due. Quin, who had become accustomed to the Shakespeare-D'Avenant *Macbeth*, demanded in his ignorance one day, "Don't I play *Macbeth* as Shakespeare wrote it?" Shortly afterwards he heard Garrick speaking the original lines and capped this with, "Where in the world did the fellow get that from?" So we must be fair to Garrick, and remember the ignorant times he lived in.

At least twenty-four revivals of Shakespeare took place during Garrick's regime, but even with an excellent company under good management, Drury Lane had a hard struggle against Covent Garden, where Rich was drawing vast crowds to his pantomimes.

On June 22nd, 1749, Garrick married a lovely dancer named Eva Maria Speigel, known on the stage as Mlle. Violetti, "at the church in Russell Street, Bloomsbury, and afterwards at the chapel of the Portuguese embassy in Audley Street." He had become tired of Peg Woffington's wantonness, though it is reported that he offered to marry her if she would mend her ways. The Garricks took a house for several years in Southampton Street, Strand (now No. 27), but in 1754 purchased their famous little house at Hampton.

The marriage infuriated Peg Woffington who forsook Drury Lane forthwith, and in 1750 both Spranger Barry and Mrs. Cibber followed her, though the latter returned after a while. The loss of three principals by Drury Lane gave Covent Garden by far the stronger company, and Garrick, much against his will, was compelled to stage pantomimes in opposition to Rich in order to check the diminution of his audiences.

In 1755 the King was present at Drury Lane at a Command Performance of *The Chinese Festival* (Noverre) when a riot broke out in both the pit and the gallery on account of the foreign dancers employed by Garrick. Great damage was done to the theatre, and the rioters even attacked Garrick's town house in Southampton Street. Three days later when Garrick came on the stage he told the audience politely but firmly that if such a disturbance ever occurred again, he would leave the stage and never return.

The competition from Covent Garden continued to cause anxiety at Drury Lane, and on one never-to-be-forgotten night the takings dropped as low as five pounds. So Garrick decided to make a continental tour, and left this country with his wife in September, 1763, for Paris. They were given a wonderful reception, and made the acquaintance of Diderot in the house of Baron d'Holbach. They then proceeded to Italy, toured extensively, returned by way of Munich to Paris and eventually arrived back in London in April, 1765.

Garrick's lengthy absence and the enthusiasm with which he had been greeted on the continent made the London audiences realise the greatness of the actor they had neglected. He was by then a wealthy man, and was quite prepared to retire, but the King, George III, commanded him to return to Drury Lane, and he was received by a wildly excited audience.

On December 29th, 1775, *The Merchant of Venice* was staged at Drury Lane with an unknown actress as Portia. She was a young lady named Siddons who had come up from a travelling company

in the country because Garrick thought she showed some promise, but alas ! she was a complete failure, chiefly on account of "nerves." After one or two other appearances described by the critics as "lamentable," she fled back to her actor husband in the provinces. But we shall hear more of her later.

In 1776 Garrick announced his intention of retiring, and vast audiences drawn from all parts of the country flocked to his farewell performances. On June 10th he made his last appearance on the stage in *The Wonder*, by Centlivre, and there arose a<sup>1</sup> "universal pæan of praise . . . from the greatest men of every variety of taste and prejudice that England, or perhaps the world, has ever known."

His retirement was short, for he died on January 20th, 1779, barely sixty-two years of age, leaving about a hundred thousand pounds. He had a magnificent funeral: <sup>2</sup> "The streets were crowded, and the string of carriages extended from the Strand to the Abbey. The Bishop of Rochester received the *cortège*. The pall-bearers were the Duke of Devonshire, Lords Camden, Ossory, Spencer and Palmerston, and Sir Watkin Wynne." Johnson remarked "I am disappointed by that stroke of death which has eclipsed the gaiety of nations, and impoverished the public stock of harmless pleasure." Garrick was buried at the foot of Shakespeare's statue in the Abbey.

Although Garrick excelled as an actor and manager, he made one or two serious errors of judgment: for instance, he refused to perform John Home's popular tragedy *Douglas*, in which Anne Barry scored a tremendous success as Lady Randolph; and Goldsmith's first comedy *The Good Natur'd Man*.

In addition to those I have already mentioned, there were one or two other noteworthy players of the Garrick period. Spranger Barry, for one, was born in Skinner Row, Dublin, in 1719, son of an eminent silversmith of that city. He succeeded his father into the business, but mismanaged it and became a bankrupt, so he turned to the stage for a livelihood. He was first seen at the Smock Alley Theatre, Dublin, and in time distinguished himself there in Shakespearean rôles; then after meeting Garrick he was engaged for Drury Lane, where he found favour very quickly. In 1750 he had a dispute with Garrick, and with Mrs. Cibber went over to Covent Garden, playing there for eight years until he went back to Dublin with Woodward to build the Crow Street Theatre, which was opened on October 23rd, 1758. He also opened a new theatre

<sup>1</sup> H. B. Baker: *The London Stage* v. I. 93.

<sup>2</sup> D.N.B.

land. Her last performance was at her benefit night at Drury Lane in 1785, and she died on February 16th, 1788.

### COVENT GARDEN

During the Garrick period pantomime was the chief attraction at Covent Garden. Rich died in 1761 and left the theatre to his son-in-law, John Beard, who shortly afterwards sold it to the elder Colman, Harris Rutherford and Powell. The partners quarrelled over a woman—Mrs. Lessingham—and a lawsuit took place in 1770. That, however, is not of any great importance to us. What does concern us is that on March 15th, 1773, the Covent Garden company gave the first performance of Goldsmith's famous comedy *She Stoops to Conquer*. Curiously enough, Colman originally refused this play, and it was only the persistence of Dr. Johnson that made him change his mind. The players, too, disliked it, but the first night sealed the success of this play: the audience applauded with wild enthusiasm.

Another notable date at Covent Garden was May 7th, 1789, when Macklin at the age of *ninety-two* made his last appearance on the stage. He played Shylock, but broke down after the first few speeches, and turning to the audience he begged their pardon and asked them to allow his understudy to continue in his place. He died at the age of 100 at No. 4 Tavistock Row, Covent Garden, and was buried beneath the chancel of St. Paul's Parish Church nearby. At least one historian maintains that Macklin was born in 1690, in which case he would have been 107 when he died!

### THE HAYMARKET

We have already seen how one theatre manager cleverly evaded the Licensing Act. Samuel Foote in the middle of the eighteenth century hit upon an even more subtle plan when he wanted to give a performance in the Little Theatre in the Haymarket without a licence.

In the *General Advertiser* there appeared the announcement:

“On Saturday afternoon, exactly at twelve o'clock, at the New Theatre in the Haymarket, Mr. Foote begs the favour of his friends to come and drink a dish of chocolate with him, and 'tis hoped there will be a great deal of company and some joyous spirits. He will endeavour to make the afternoon as diverting as possible. Tickets to be had for this entertainment at George's Coffee House, Temple Bar, without which no one will be admitted.

N.B.—Sir Dilbury Diddle will be there, and Lady Betty Frisk has absolutely promised."

Everybody's curiosity was aroused immediately, and people flocked to the theatre for this novelty. When the curtain rose, Foote appeared on the stage, greeted his "friends," and suggested that while the chocolate was being prepared they might care to watch him training some young actors and actresses for the stage! Then the performance took place in the ordinary manner while the audience enjoyed not only their chocolate but also the knowledge that once again the Lord Chamberlain had been fooled by a clever manager.

Foote then arranged evening performances, genially inviting his "friends" to have "tea" with him! The playgoers loved these shows, and "having a dish of tea with Mr. Foote" became the most fashionable pursuit of the leisured classes.

Samuel Foote [1720-1777] was born at Truro, educated at Worcester and Oxford, and came to London as a law student. Actually he became a fashionable idler with a *flair* for mimicry, and eventually found his way on to the stage. He established himself as an actor, and wrote many amusing sketches. His best work was the comedy *The Minor* [1760], a satire directed against the Methodists. All manner of prominent people were pilloried in his caricatures.

In 1766 Foote visited Lord Mexborough at the latter's country residence. Thinking that it would amuse the other guests, his host made him ride upon a singularly intractable horse, and as one might have expected, Foote was thrown off. His leg was fractured in two places, and it had to be amputated. Mexborough, feeling that some sort of amends should be made to the actor, went to the King and persuaded His Majesty to give Foote a licence to open the Little Theatre in Haymarket officially between May 14th and September 14th of each year. It was that licence that induced Foote to rebuild the house in 1767.

#### OLIVER GOLDSMITH

Goldsmith, son of an Irish clergyman, was born in 1728, either at Pallasmore, Longford, or at Elphin, Roscommon. His birthplace is the subject of controversy among historians. He was educated at various grammar schools, but his schooling was interrupted by a severe attack of small-pox which left a permanent disfigurement of his features. This, and the fact that he was a small

and rather delicate-looking lad, made him the butt of spiteful attacks from both masters and schoolfellows. He was even branded as a dunce and flogged.

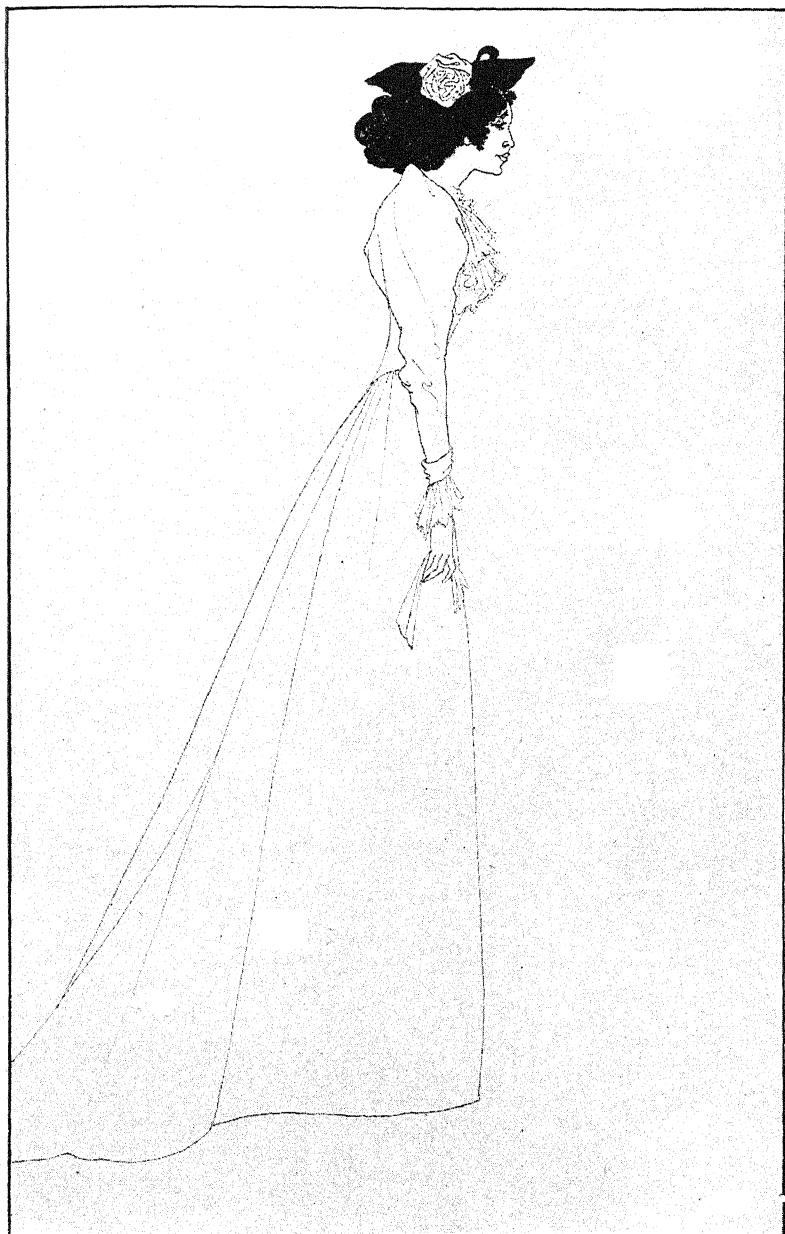
At Trinity College, Dublin, he was a sizar (i.e., a student who paid very little and who was obliged to perform certain menial duties). He was desperately poor, and frequently had to eke out an existence by writing street-ballads which he sold for five shillings each. He graduated and offered himself for ordination, but was rejected. After trying to make a start in two or three other professions, he went to Edinburgh to study medicine, but apparently took little interest in the subject, for he worked in a desultory manner and made little progress. He proceeded to Leyden, still with the intention of qualifying as a physician, but we are told that he left this university, too, without a degree. Then for some considerable time he merely wandered about France, Switzerland and Italy earning just enough money to pay for a bed and a meal here and there by playing his flute for dancing.

Returning to London in 1756, penniless and with scarcely a friend in the world, he undertook a succession of servile jobs to keep him from starvation, for although he made vague claims to having taken a doctor's degree on the continent, he was rejected as unqualified when he sought a lowly medical appointment in a hospital.

Goldsmith then became a literary hack, and took an attic to which he had to climb a long flight of stone stairs called Breakneck Steps, in the Ludgate Hill district. He wrote poems and articles, did translations and all manner of odd literary tasks for local booksellers.

In time, his work became quite popular, and he was able to withdraw from the companionship of beggars and thieves and mix with men of letters. He became acquainted with Smollett, met Reynolds the painter, and was introduced to Edmund Burke. His new friends were not enthusiastic about his garret: the scarcity of its furniture and the inadequacy of its heating made entertaining difficult. One of them called on a bitterly cold winter's day and found Goldsmith working without a fire, so a neighbour's child had to be sent out to fetch a small quantity of coal in a humble bedroom utensil.

He moved to a more comfortable dwelling at No. 6 Wine Office Court, Fleet Street, in 1760. By this time he was contributing to various magazines and enjoying a connection with leading booksellers. He met Samuel Johnson in the following year and became



51. MRS. PATRICK CAMPBELL, from a drawing by Aubrey Beardsley



52. ELLEN TERRY as Lady Macbeth, from a painting by Sargent

one of the original members of "The Club" (the famous Literary Club).

But money matters still continued to harass him. In 1764 he was living at Islington with his rent so much in arrears that his landlady had been obliged to call in the sheriff's officer. Goldsmith sent a messenger round to Johnson asking for a loan of a guinea to pay to the landlady on account. Johnson sent the money and decided to visit Goldsmith. To his astonishment he arrived to discover that his insolvent friend had changed the guinea and was abusing the landlady over a bottle of Madeira wine. Johnson put the cork back into the bottle and demanded to know how the money was going to be found. Goldsmith then produced the manuscript of his novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*. His friend glanced through it, saw that it was readily saleable, and took it straight away to a bookseller, disposing of it for sixty pounds.

In the same year Goldsmith's famous poem *The Traveller* appeared, and the success of this, with *The Vicar of Wakefield* which was published in 1766, encouraged him to try writing for the stage. His *Good Natur'd Man* was refused by Garrick, but was produced at Covent Garden in January, 1768, and although it made no great impression it brought him about five hundred pounds.

We cannot consider his other literary works in this book, so we must pass on to his second play *She Stoops to Conquer*. This was a complete triumph, and it is regrettable that its success did not induce him to write more for the stage. He died on April 4th, 1774, at the age of forty-five, and was buried in the Temple Church-yard, though no trace of his grave can now be found.

## Chapter VI

### THE STROLLING PLAYERS

SO far, we have been concerned chiefly with drama in London, so before we proceed, let us see how the provinces fared during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There is not a great deal of reliable information about the early history of the provincial theatres, but we do know that the majority of the plays were provided by the "strolling players," though it is true that during the summer months the greater provincial cities would sometimes be favoured by a visit from one of the London companies.

It would be quite impossible to make even a rough estimate of the number of strolling companies there were in existence, but it is almost certain that there was one attached to each of the larger towns, and that such a company would generally make short tours in the immediate neighbourhood. Incidentally, some of the better established and less mobile companies disliked the designation "strolling players."

Apart from these, there were also innumerable little bands of unlicensed players who would eke out a precarious existence by touring the smaller towns. Their life was a hard one: they were often at the mercy of an unscrupulous manager who saw that the bulk of the profits went into his own pocket. We are told that they frequently went without food, and that after a week's hard work their only share of the profit would be a stock supper "which was generally ended in a Quarrel by way of Dessert." For all that, there were plenty who loved the life, and we have evidence of their high-spirits from the travellers who used to meet them on the roads.

Travelling was difficult for the poorest companies, as each man had to carry a share of the scenery or wardrobe on his back! Usually, however, at least one waggon was employed, and of course, it was generally the manager who claimed the privilege of riding on it so that he could keep an eye on the properties. Some of the more prosperous companies had a coach as well, but even then, accidents were not uncommon. In bad weather they would get stuck on the poor roads, and there was always the danger of being overturned.

On their arrival at a town they had first to get permission to perform from the mayor or magistrates. Sometimes one or two of the players would ride on ahead of the rest to secure this in advance. Then the players would put on their smartest clothes (generally borrowed from the company's wardrobe) and gather in the centre of the town, beat a drum and distribute playbills.

Performances had to be given wherever accommodation could be found: inn-yards, barns, town halls, and so forth. If their luck was out they would sometimes have to resort to a stable. John Bernard in his *Recollections of the Stage* says that his first experience as an actor was in a room in an inn where the manager had:

“suspended a collection of green tatters along its middle for a curtain, erected a pair of paper screens right-hand and left for wings; arranged four candles in front of said wings to divide the stage from the orchestra (the fiddlers' chairs being legitimate division of the orchestra from the Pit), and with all the spare benches of the inn to form boxes, and a hoop suspended from the ceiling (perforated with a dozen nails to receive as many tallow candles) to suggest the idea of a chandelier; he had constructed and embellished what he denominated a 'Theatre.'”

The properties were just about as meagre as the costumes, though in *The Strollers* [Breval: 1727] a character explains proudly: “. . . we have a Second-hand Dragon, that lost a Wing and two Claws in an opera last Winter.”

The larger companies would take their own little orchestra with them, but the others had to be content with engaging whatever musicians they could find in the towns they visited: generally a motley crowd whose efforts would distress even the most hardened ear. More often than not, a couple of fiddlers would represent the entire available musical talent of the town, and it would indeed be fortunate if both were found to be sufficiently capable and sober to play the music required of them.

Notwithstanding the paucity of the players and their properties, the eighteenth-century theatrical announcements in the provincial press were the most lengthy extravaganzas of verbosity and exaggeration imaginable!

Some idea of the life of the strolling players—even when they possessed a thoroughly honourable and enterprising manager—may be gained from S. W. Ryley's most interesting book *The Itinerant* [published in 1803]. He writes:

“The sharing plan was always my aversion; to remedy this I made a proposal to try the town of Ludlow upon small salaries of half-guinea, fifteen shillings, and a guinea, according to the merits and utility of the different performers. . . .

“. . . I was waiting at the theatre with some impatience, when the stage-keeper came running to inform me that the waggon was overturned and Mr. Long killed. In an instant I was on the spot and sure enough there lay the contents of the cart, and Bonny Long under the whole. The crowd had considerably increased: some were humanely employed in lifting off boxes in order to release the sufferer, others supported his wife, who though safe from the fall, was in fits for the fate of her husband, whilst the eight little brats in scarlet jackets ran about like dancing dogs prepared for a stage exhibition. Poor Long was at length liberated with no other inconvenience than was occasioned by the suffocating dust arising from the old scenes, which had completely preserved him from the pressure of the boxes.

“The theatre was a miserably poor place, and when filled would scarcely contain twenty pounds. We opened it the following Monday with the comedy of *The Beaux' Stratagem*. The receipts amounted to five pounds, and although the company were much reduced, I found a continuance of such receipts would disable me from paying the salaries. The second and third nights were not much better, and the third week I found myself under the unpleasant necessity of addressing the company and placing them on the old establishment.

“The houses instead of improving, went from bad to worse; dissatisfaction generally prevailed—‘the sharing was not an existence.’ This I very readily allowed, but surely no blame could be attached to me: in vain I urged the small receipts and heavy disbursements. One more witty than the rest chose to exercise his humour at my expense, and on the following day was seen walking down with his five shilling share in a canvas purse at the end of his stick placed over his right shoulder; jocularly informing every one who inquired that his last week’s share was so heavy. This sarcasm hurt me greatly. Ludlow races now approached and great expectations were formed: overflowing houses were promised, and I vainly hoped it would be in my power to make amends for the miserable pittance they had hitherto received. But here, as in most of my undertakings, fortune dashed down the cup of hope just as I was

raising it to my lips—on the first race night, a ball opposed the theatre, and the receipts were so trifling, it was not thought proper to perform. To make amends for this I applied to the stewards to patronise the next night, but this could not be effected: the grand ordinary dinner was to be that evening, and would detain the company till a late hour. As there were only two days' races I was now at my wits' end: the only probable way of drawing them to the theatre was to perform in the morning. Again I waited on the stewards and obtained their consent and promised attendance. Accordingly, the *Castle of Andalusia* was advertised by desire of the stewards of the race, to begin at eleven o'clock. This new and unpleasant time of performance was particularly irksome—to shut out daylight and to substitute candles for the glorious sun on a hot summer's morn appeared little better than sacrilege; but there was no alternative between this and empty benches. The time arrived, and with this astonishing patronage we raised eleven pounds."

The proprietors of the Wolverhampton theatre promised Ryley that if he went there his receipts could not be less than two hundred pounds. Here is what happened in Ryley's own words:

"We arrived without accident, and the theatre was advertised to open on the Monday. Had I been as well acquainted as I am now with the description of people who attend fairs, especially merry-making fairs, I should never have undertaken this disastrous journey. Three, four and five pounds were the customary receipts. In a state of mind bordering on distraction I went over to Birmingham, and, by way of *forcing* a house for the last night, engaged Messrs. Grist, Banks and Barrymore to perform in *Othello* and *Rosina*, for which I was to give them each a guinea and pay the chaise-hire. The receipts of that night, with all this *great acting*, amounted to seven pounds!!! out of which I had to pay these gentlemen three guineas, besides travelling expenses!!! I have known actors, aye and poor ones too, who would have received the three guineas with some appearance of regret; nay, there are those who would not have taken them at all: but these great people were superior to such little prejudices. They not only received them with ease and good-humour, but the greatest man of the three made a famous good story of it, to the great delight of his auditors in the Birmingham green-room next day. Yet so blind was I to the narrowness of this conduct, that the supper bill (no small one,

it may be supposed when 'tis recollected who composed the party) I discharged under the idea of gentlemanly hospitality—a prejudice which ought to have died with my shipwrecked fortune. The hour of departure arrived, and thirty pounds, the whole of the week's receipts, were all that I had to satisfy the actors, by lending each a little, and a long train of incidental expenses incurred by the journey, besides chaises to carry us back, and maintenance on the road. This was the greatest difficulty I ever experienced; to wait upon the different tradesmen with apologies instead of money was, to a man of my temperament, grating beyond all description. However, there was no alternative: when I told my story, they were gentle and kind, and would patiently wait my own time of payment. Credit for chaises to transport us back was likewise cheerfully granted, and we left Wolverhampton, after this inauspicious week, minus about fifty pounds."

Poor, generous old Ryley! One cannot help feeling sorry for this kind-hearted soul who tried so hard to improve the lot of his company. Fortunately, these losses were sometimes made good by a few successful weeks, particularly if the players had the good fortune to get a theatre in one of the larger towns. So let us now look at the theatres in a few of the provincial cities where drama prospered. It will not, of course, be possible to include in this modest volume a complete history of all the more historic provincial theatres.

#### BATH

Queen Anne visited Bath in 1702 to take the waters in the Pump Room, and was so charmed by this ancient city that she planned a return visit in the following year. Colley Cibber in his *Apology* tells us that during Her Majesty's second visit the Drury Lane company went down to the famous spa to entertain her, and that it was in Bath that Mrs. Oldfield made a great hit (much to his astonishment) as Leonora in *Sir Courtey Nsice*.

Bath's first theatre was built in 1705 by public subscription. We are told that people of the highest rank contributed, and accordingly had their names engraved on the walls inside the auditorium. It was erected at the corner of Borough Walls and what is now Parsonage Lane, and was first used by a company known as "The Duke of Grafton's Servants," led by John Power, who had been playing in Bristol.

*The Daily Courant* dated September 24th, 1706, informs us that

the Duke and Duchess of Beaufort and other people of quality had attended a performance of *The Recruiting Officer* at the Bath Theatre.

It seems that despite excellent patronage this playhouse deteriorated slightly in later years, because Daniel Defoe in his *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* recorded the following impression after his visit to Bath in 1725 :

“ In the afternoon there is generally a Play, tho’ the Decorations are mean, and the Performances accordingly ; but it answers, for the Company here (not the Actors) make the Play, to say no more.”

But in 1728 John Gay visited the city to produce his famous *Beggar’s Opera*, and created a great sensation. *The Bristol News* of May 11th says :

“ We hear from Bath, That last Week all the Quality went to the Playhouse to hear the Rehearsal of *The Beggar’s Opera*. . . . And that on Monday and Wednesday last, notwithstanding the Pit and Boxes were laid together, they were so full, that they turn’d as many away as they took in : ”

The Bath playhouse was closed by the Licensing Act in 1737, and was purchased by the Trustees of the Mineral Water Hospital, who demolished it forthwith. Part of this hospital now stands upon the site of this theatre. Lady Hawley then allowed the players to use the large chamber beneath the ballroom of the Assembly Rooms. Some years later they moved to The Globe Inn in Kingsmead Square for a while, and then to The George Inn. Eventually a new theatre was built in Orchard Street.

#### NORWICH

Immediately after the Restoration, Norwich became a popular centre for the provincial companies of players, in fact the Corporation had to ask for powers to limit the stay of strolling players because “ they drain too much money from the inhabitants.”

The favourite rendezvous of the players was The Red Lion (since replaced by The Cricketers’ Arms), though in 1692 we find a company playing “ at the Angell in St. Peter of Mancroft ” as well. At the latter there was a disaster on January 27th, 1692, while a play was in progress. *Dawks’ News Letter* records that “ . . . the House being very full, it broke down the Gallery, which kill’d a young Woman outright, and dangerously bruised and wounded a great many people.”

Early in the eighteenth century both The King's Arms and The Queen's Arms were being used for theatrical purposes, but the principal theatre was the White Swan Playhouse, which also stood near the lovely old church of St. Peter Mancroft. It was partly rebuilt in 1739 and again in 1747 when Macklin paid it a visit.

An entirely new theatre was built in Norwich in 1758. *The Norwich Gazette* of January 28th of that year declares :

“The Grand and Magnificent Theatre in this City, which is now finished, and to be open'd on Thursday the 31st of this Instant January, is allow'd by all the Connoisseurs and Judges to be the most perfect and compleat Structure of the kind in this Kingdom. It is most admirably constructed for seeing and hearing ;—the Stage is large and lofty ;—and the Scenes so highly finish'd and executed by the late ingenious Mr. Collins, that they are accounted far superior of any of the kind . . . a compleat and regular Band of Musick is provided—and the greatest Care has been taken to air the House, by keeping constant Fires, so that we can assure the Ladies, Gentlemen &c., that there is not the least Damp throughout the whole Building.”

## YORK

The earliest records of the players in York tell us that in 1705 the Merchant Taylors' Hall was used for theatrical performances, but there is also reliable evidence that the Market House in what is now St. Sampson's Square also provided accommodation for the production of plays. Moreover, in 1727, a “Mr. Keregan's Company of Comedians” existed, there was a “Mr. Banks' Cockpit without Bootham Bar,” and yet another company in the following year playing in the Moot Hall.

In 1733 Keregan applied for permission to build a proper playhouse in York, and receiving a favourable reply from the Mayor's Court, began to erect a new theatre in Lord Irwin's Yard, on the site of the present Residentiary in the Minster Yard. It was opened in the following year, but could not have been very satisfactory because within eight years proposals were being made for the erection of “a new and commodious Theatre (to be situated in some convenient part of the city) the model of those in London.” Nothing was done until 1744 when a new theatre was built on the site now occupied by the present Theatre Royal. Another building was erected in 1765 by Joseph Baker, who shortly afterwards took in Tate Wilkinson as a partner. Under Wilkinson's able

management the York Theatre became famous in the annals of the English theatre.

### LIVERPOOL

Taking Liverpool as another example, we find references to "The Cockpit Yard Theatre" as early as 1567. It measured fifty feet by twenty feet, had a gallery and whitewashed walls, but there is little information concerning the companies that used it. Another of Liverpool's oldest theatres, The Old Ropery, was used on one occasion, in 1742, by the players from the Smock Alley Theatre, Dublin, including the notorious Peg Woffington.

The first playhouse of any importance to be opened in Liverpool, however, was the Drury Lane Theatre, named after the famous London house. According to R. J. Broadbent's *Annals of the Liverpool Stage*, it opened either in 1749 or 1750, and was reconstructed in 1758. In 1759 it reopened as "The New Theatre in Drury Lane," and Charles Lee Lewes in his *Memoirs* noted that: "Here it was for the first time boxes were erected as a just partition for the better sort to withdraw from the near contact of drunken sailors and their female associates."

Liverpool's first Theatre Royal was erected in 1772; a commodious building of red brick in Williamson Square. It opened on June 5th with the tragedy *Mahomet*, and the farce *The Deuce is in him*, played before a large audience of the city's most wealthy residents, and from that time Liverpool has figured prominently in theatrical history. Garrick and Macklin visited the city, and Mrs. Siddons frequently played there.

### RICHMOND

For centuries Richmond was a fashionable summer resort of Londoners, particularly after the opening of Richmond Wells in 1696, but we have little reliable evidence of dramatic activity there until 1718, when *Read's Weekly Journal*, dated May 31st of that year announced:

"We hear that the famous Mr. Penkethman is building a handsome Playhouse at Richmond for the Diversion of the Nobility and Quality that attend the Court of Their Royal Highnesses; and will begin to play there soon after Whitsuntide. . . ."

This theatre was opened on the following July 19th with *The Spanish Fryar* and *The Stage Coach*, after which it appears to have been in frequent use until another theatre was erected in 1730. *The Daily Journal* for June 4th, 1730, tells us:

“There is building, and almost finish’d here, a small, but very neat and regular Theatre, a little higher on the Hill than where the late Mr Penkethman’s stood. We hear it will be open’d next week by a Company of Comedians from the Theatre Royal in Lincoln’s Inn Field, and that their first play will be *The Recruiting Officer*.”

It came into the hands of Theophilus Cibber in 1756, and it is of some interest to note that he evaded the Licensing Act by calling the theatre a snuff warehouse, and by carrying on an academy of dramatic art in it! One of his announcements proclaimed that :

<sup>1</sup> “Cibber and Co., snuff merchants, sell at their warehouse at Richmond Hill most cephalic snuff, which, taken in moderate quantities . . . will not fail to raise the spirits, clear the brain, throw off ill humours . . . exhilarate the mind, give joy to the heart, and greatly invigorate and improve the understanding. Mr. Cibber has also opened at the aforesaid warehouse, late called the Theatre on the hill, an historic academy for the instruction of young persons of genius in the art of acting, and proposes, for the better improvement of such pupils, and frequently with his assistance, to give public rehearsals without hire, gain or reward.”

Another theatre was built at Richmond in 1765, this time on the Green, but the old theatre on the hill continued in use for two or three years until it was converted first into a Methodist chapel and later into a granary. It was pulled down in 1826 when York Place was built.

#### BRISTOL

Despite the most savage air raids during the Second World War, this ancient city has been able to preserve for posterity one of the most historic theatres in the land.

At the close of the seventeenth century there was a theatrical booth in Bristol’s Horsefair, and in 1704 another such booth was erected in Tucker Street, near Bristol Bridge, by John Power, who, it will be recalled, appeared afterwards at the new theatre at Bath. But the Puritanical element in Bristol was very strong, and in the same year we find urgent demands being made to the Mayor and Aldermen that “by regard to the ill-consequences of the introduction of lewdness and debauchery by the acting of stage-plays, players should not be allowed to act within the city.”

<sup>1</sup> Lysons. *Environs* v. 1, 469.

Later in this same year we find another effort being made to suppress the acting of plays and interludes, and a complaint about the "Great Number of Tippling Houses," both of which, it was said, "corrupt and debauch our Youth, and utterly ruin many Apprentices and Servants, already so Unruly and Licentious." Consequently, the booth in Tucker Street was sold to the Presbyterians for use as a meeting house.

Power made another attempt to produce plays in Bristol in 1706, but this was promptly suppressed by the magistrates, and provoked a stupid book by the Rev. Arthur Bedford, Vicar of Temple Church, Bristol, entitled *The Evil and Danger of Stage Plays*.

The first proper playhouse to be built in Bristol was the Jacob's Wells Theatre, erected in 1729. It opened with Congreve's *Love for Love*, played by Hippisley's company. Hippisley began his theatrical career as a candle-snuffer, but made his way to London and eventually became a comedian at Drury Lane. Macklin, by the way, frequently visited Bristol to play in the Jacob's Wells Theatre, and paid great attention to the daughter of a local gentleman.

In those days, Queen's Square and Prince's Street were Bristol's most fashionable residential quarters—the beautiful suburb of Clifton was then but a village—so when it was decided to erect a new and more worthy theatre, a site was chosen in King Street, one of the principal thoroughfares adjacent to Queen's Square. James Paty, the chosen architect, and Thomas Symons, a local solicitor who was primarily responsible for the project, came to London to inspect the metropolitan theatres, and returned with the plans of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, to guide them.

Bristol's Theatre Royal was erected in 1765 at a cost of five thousand pounds, and accommodated seven hundred and fifty people in the boxes, three hundred and twenty in the pit, and five hundred and thirty in the gallery. It opened on May 30th, 1766, with *The Conscious Lovers* (Steele), followed by the farce *The Miller of Mansfield*; and we are told that "when the whole was illuminated there appeared one of the finest scenes Imagination can conceive; the rich paintings, together with the brilliancy of the ladies, formed so complete a view that Malice herself, had she been there, must (for that night at least) have put on a smile of approbation." Garrick described this theatre as "the most complete of its dimensions in England."

The "Theatre in King Street" as it was then called, had no licence, and for the next twelve years heated controversy raged in

the city between the puritans and those who sought a licence. Finally, on August 27th, 1778, the patent was granted to George Daubeny, the proprietors' nominee, for a period of twenty-one years (subsequent renewals were obtained without difficulty)—and the playhouse then became known as The Theatre Royal.

This famous theatre still stands, and although considerable alterations were made during the nineteenth century, it is a building of great historic importance. It was cleaned and redecorated a few years ago by C.E.M.A. (The Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts),<sup>1</sup> under whose auspices the greatest dramatic works we possess are regularly presented to the citizens of Bristol.

<sup>1</sup>As the Arts Council was originally called

## Chapter VII

### ENTER SHERIDAN, KEMBLE AND MRS. SIDDONS

RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN was born in Dublin on October 30th, 1751, and was educated at Harrow, where he met N. B. Halhed with whom he collaborated in his earliest works. These were a metrical translation of *Aristaenetus* and a farce called *Jupiter*, written after Sheridan had left school and was living at Bath. The latter was rejected by Garrick and Foote.

While at Bath, Sheridan fell in love with Elizabeth Ann, the beautiful sixteen-year-old daughter of Thomas Linley the composer, and to protect her from the persistent attentions of the undesirable Major Mathews, he escorted her to a convent in France. While they were on their way over, he persuaded her to marry him, and some sort of a ceremony was performed at a village not far from Calais. Returning to Bath, Sheridan fought two duels with Mathews, but when Linley brought his daughter home, Sheridan was sent to Waltham Abbey to continue his studies. On April 6th, 1773, he was entered at Middle Temple, and a week later he openly married Miss Linley with her father's consent. Within a year they had taken a house in Orchard Street, Portman Square, and furnished it expensively despite the fact that Sheridan had very little money.

His first comedy *The Rivals* was produced at Covent Garden on January 17th, 1775, but made little impression at first because of indifferent playing by some of the actors. It was withdrawn, revised slightly, and put on again eleven days later with remarkable success. He followed this with his farce *St. Patrick's Day, or The Scheming Lieutenant*, and the comic opera *The Duenna*, which enjoyed seventy-five performances at Covent Garden that season—a record at that time.

When Garrick announced his intention of retiring, Sheridan, with the help of two partners, Thomas Linley (his father-in-law) and Dr. Ford, purchased his share for thirty-five thousand pounds. Two years later, Sheridan also bought Lacy's share for a similar sum, raising the money by a heavy mortgage.

Thus Drury Lane came almost entirely under Sheridan's

management.' He staged *The Rivals* there early in 1777 and soon afterwards produced his adaptation of Vanbrugh's *Relapse* entitled *A Trip to Scarborough*. These paved the way for Sheridan's masterpiece *The School for Scandal*, which he produced on May 8th in the same year. It narrowly escaped suppression, and it is said that the Lord Chamberlain licensed it only because of his personal friendship with Sheridan. The plot on which this play is based had been simmering in his mind for five years. It created a furore in London, and for months drew the largest houses the profession had ever known.

His farce *The Critic* followed on October 29th, 1779, and in the same year he produced his last play *Pizarro*. Meanwhile he had become a prominent figure in society, and was elected M.P. for Stafford in the following year. The story that he paid the burgesses of that town five guineas each for their support cannot be proved, but it is significant that his first speech in the House was an eloquent defence of himself against a charge of bribery. His political career after this time need not concern us.

On October 10th, 1782, the young Mrs. Siddons (to whom I referred in a previous chapter) re-appeared at Drury Lane in Southern's *Isabella, or The Fatal Marriage* at a modest salary of five pounds a week. But what a difference now! H. B. Baker in *The London Stage* declares :

"Her beautiful face and form, the exquisite tones of her voice, her deep tenderness, seized upon every heart, and her overwhelming agony thrilled every soul as it had never been thrilled before. Men wept, women fell into hysterics, transports of applause shook the house, the excitement and enthusiasm were almost terrible in their intensity, and the curtain fell amidst such acclamations as perhaps even Garrick had never received."

On February 2nd, 1784, she first played Lady Macbeth—the rôle in which she became so famous.

Sarah Siddons—her maiden name was Kemble—was born at the Shoulder of Mutton Inn at Brecon, on July 5th, 1755, the eldest of twelve children of Roger Kemble, actor and manager of a company of strolling players. She received a desultory education, and appeared on various stages several times in minor parts as a child. A young actor from Birmingham, William Siddons, joined the company when she was little more than a girl, and the two fell in love. Her parents disapproved strongly : the young man was discharged and the beautiful Sarah sent as a lady's maid to

Guy's Cliff, Warwickshire, where she recited Shakespeare in the servants' hall and read almost every evening to her master. The young couple remained faithful to each other however, and at last Sarah obtained her parents' consent to their marriage, which took place at Trinity Church, Coventry, on November 26th, 1773.

They both accepted engagements with travelling companies, playing at Bath, Wolverhampton, Cheltenham and other centres. On December 29th, 1775, as I have already recorded, Mrs. Siddons made her first appearance at Drury Lane, failed at this and subsequent performances in town, and returned to the provinces to gain further experience.

In Manchester she scored a great triumph in 1776, and in the following year made a wonderful impression at York, Bath and Liverpool. The enterprising manager of the Bath Theatre was quick to see her worth and secured her services for over four years. It was in this lovely western city that she became famous, playing over a hundred different parts. Wildly enthusiastic reports of her acting spread to Bristol, whose wealthy merchants demanded her appearance again and again in their new theatre in King Street, and at last Sheridan had to approach her with an offer to return to Drury Lane. But Mrs. Siddons never forgot that it was the city of Bath that made her famous, and on her farewell night, amid frantic applause, she brought her three children—Henry, Sarah and Maria—on to the stage and introduced them to the audience.

Her success in London now became the talk of the town. Johnson described her as "a prodigious fine woman," Reynolds painted her as the Tragic Muse (his masterpiece), and both Gainsborough and Lawrence did portraits of her.

Soon after her return to London, her brother John Philip Kemble made his début at Drury Lane as Hamlet, after having established his reputation in the provinces. He became manager of the Theatre Royal in 1788, Sheridan being engrossed in his political work.

In 1785 Dorothea Jordan, a young actress from Yorkshire, took London by storm in the part of Peggy in *The Country Girl*. This attractive, talented young lady was born near Waterford, Ireland, in 1762, and at quite an early age established herself on the stage in "tomboy" parts in Dublin, Cork and York, before her début at Drury Lane. During her lengthy engagement in London her private life became the greatest scandal of the age. She had already had a daughter by her first manager in Ireland,

but this did not prevent her from bearing four illegitimate children during an association with Sir Richard Ford, and finally she became the mistress of the Duke of Clarence (afterwards William IV) and produced another ten children, who took the name of Fitz-Clarence. The eldest was created Earl of Munster. The Duke allowed her a thousand pounds a year, but on one occasion wrote to her suggesting that this should be reduced to five hundred. For her reply she merely tore from the bottom of a playbill a strip bearing the words "No money returned after the rising of the curtain."

By 1791 the Theatre Royal had become so dilapidated that it would have been impossible to restore Wren's structure satisfactorily, so on June 5th a gang of workmen arrived in Drury Lane and began the demolition of the old house.

#### THE HAYMARKET

Soon after Foote succeeded in getting a patent for the "Little Theatre in Haymarket," he was persuaded to sell out to George Colman for an annuity of sixteen hundred pounds a year—though the poor fellow did not live long to enjoy it. The company at Haymarket at that time was not important, though it included one or two outstanding comedians, such as Ned Shuter and Quick, a great favourite of George III. Garrick considered Shuter to be the greatest comic genius of his age. He drank heavily, and had an insatiable passion for attending prayer meetings! On one particular Sunday he went to no less than five; then he got helplessly drunk and began preaching in the streets. He was a staunch supporter of Whitefield, and contributed liberally towards the maintenance of that evangelist's "Tabernacle."

#### THE KING'S THEATRE, HAYMARKET

Across the road, Sir John Vanbrugh's great theatre was destroyed by fire on June 17th, 1789, and the (opera) company moved temporarily to The Pantheon in Oxford Street, a large concert hall used for all types of musical activities and balls. It was fitted out as an opera house while the new King's Theatre was being built, and appropriated the patent of the opera house. Curiously enough this, too, was burnt down in 1792.

The new King's Theatre, designed by Michael Novosielski, was opened on March 26th, 1791, but was used for three seasons by the Drury Lane company while their new Theatre Royal was being built: then it became an opera house.

## SADLER'S WELLS

The wooden "Musick House" at Sadler's Wells was pulled down in 1765, and a proper stone theatre erected in its place, at a cost of £4,225, by Rosoman, the builder, who had acquired the gardens in 1743. Rosoman Street, Clerkenwell, was named after him. Prices of admission were raised accordingly to half-a-crown in the boxes, a shilling in the pit, and sixpence in the gallery; and we are told that for an extra sixpence you could have a pint of good wine that had been "four years in the wood."

The theatre was let to Thomas King, the actor, in 1772, who took in "one Serjeant, a trumpeter, and Arnold, a goldsmith" as partners. Prices were again raised, and the house was patronised by the *élite*. Pantomime was its speciality, and some spectacular effects were obtained with water displays. Between the pantomime seasons light musical shows and acrobatic performances were given.

King eventually sold his share in the theatre, and Wroughton, a Drury Lane actor, was taken into the partnership. Later Mrs. Siddons' husband became the lessee, and during his time Edmund Kean, who comes into our story later on, appeared on its stage as a boy.

## OTHER METROPOLITAN THEATRES

Towards the end of the eighteenth century one or two other small theatres began to spring up elsewhere in the London area. It will be observed that whereas in Shakespeare's time the south bank of the Thames was a favourite site for the theatres, all the Restoration playhouses were built north of the river.

The first sign of activity on the Surrey side was when Philip Astley opened a circus near Westminster Bridge. One day the King was crossing the bridge when his horse reared up and showed signs of giving trouble. Astley, who had been keeping a riding school, ran to the King's assistance, and as a reward received a licence for his theatre. He then built a wooden playhouse on the site of the temporary buildings used for his circus, and eventually was able to stage pantomimes in it.

Nearby was The Surrey Playhouse, which had been built in 1782 as The Royal Circus. It was burnt down in 1803, but rebuilt a year later and converted into a theatre in 1809.

The other theatres built during the eighteenth century (as far as we are able to discover) were the Sans Souci in Leicester Square [1793], which was demolished in 1834; and the Royalty, Well-

close Square, known also as The Brunswick and The East London Theatre [1787] which was demolished in 1828.

### THE THIRD DRURY LANE THEATRE

The new Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, was ready early in 1794; a fine new building by Henry Holland, R.A. "upon a much larger scale than that of any other theatre in Europe," with a proscenium measuring forty-three feet wide and thirty-eight feet in height, and a stage of ninety-two feet in depth. The auditorium was fifty-six feet high from floor to ceiling. The lighting of the stage was vastly improved, being chiefly concealed from view; two handsome chandeliers were all that the audience could see.

Unique at that time was the safety-curtain: a sheet-iron affair which was the prototype of the asbestos one we know to-day. The theatre accommodated 3,611 persons: 1,828 in the boxes, 800 in the pit, and 983 in the galleries.

It opened on March 12th, 1794, not with drama but with a grand selection from the oratorios of Handel, and the Coronation March, performed on a stage specially arranged for the occasion to resemble a Gothic cathedral. The first dramatic production in the new house was on the following April 21st, with Kemble and Mrs. Siddons in the leading rôles of *Macbeth*.

A special epilogue written by George Colman to allay the fear of fire was spoken by Miss Farren:

¹The very ravages of fire we scout  
For we have wherewithal to put it out;  
In ample reservoirs our firm reliance  
Where streams set conflagration at defiance.

The curtain was then raised disclosing a large lake of real water on the stage, with a man rowing a boat on it while a small waterfall was cascading down at the rear. Yet within fifteen years this theatre was again burnt to the ground!

During the last few years of the eighteenth century Sheridan neglected Drury Lane and his company shamefully. Players were obliged to ask over and over again for their salary, the trades-people grew indignant because of their unpaid bills; the wardrobe was utterly neglected, scenery became shabby, and the theatre's coffers were drained by his boundless private extravagance. Kemble carried on the management between 1788 and 1796 but received not a word of thanks and was once arrested for one of

<sup>1</sup> H. B. Baker *The London Stage* vol. i. 98

Sheridan's debts! Then Wroughton took over for a few years, but in 1800 Kemble was again persuaded to become manager by a promise of a share in the profits. Sheridan, however, did not keep to his word, and utterly disgusted, Kemble left Drury Lane in 1802 and began negotiations for a share in Covent Garden.

## Chapter VIII

### THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: EDMUND KEAN

ON February 24th, 1809, Sheridan was on the floor of the House of Commons taking part in a debate on the Peninsular War, when a messenger brought the news that the Theatre Royal was in flames. The adjournment of the debate was moved immediately "in consequence of the extent of the calamity which the event just communicated to the house would bring upon a respectable individual, a member of that house." Sheridan appreciated the compliment, but insisted that his personal misfortune should not interfere with the business of the country.

When finally he was able to go across to Drury Lane, he found nothing but charred and smouldering ruins: everything had been lost, including many valuable personal possessions, and he was completely ruined. No longer could he draw large sums to maintain his reckless extravagance, but he did everything possible to hide his feelings from his friends: he would sit for hours outside the Piazza Coffee House calmly swallowing port "by the tumblerful." But the calamity seriously affected his health, and he had the unusual experience of reading his own obituary when a rumour of his death spread throughout the capital.

Sheridan's financial reputation made it impossible for him to raise money himself for the rebuilding of the theatre, but he succeeded in persuading Samuel Whitbread, an amiable brewer, to undertake the task. Everybody trusted this practical business man, and no less than four hundred thousand pounds was raised by public subscription. Of this sixty thousand went in securing the patent rights, and twenty-eight thousand was paid to Sheridan for his interest, but Whitbread firmly refused to allow him to take any part in the management.

One would have thought that Sheridan would have enjoyed a quiet and comfortable retirement on this money, but he continued his wasteful mode of living, and in a few years was arrested for debt. He died on July 7th, 1816, and was buried in Westminster Abbey. It is said that just before he was put into his coffin a stranger rushed in to the apartment in which he was lying in state,

and formally arrested the dead man on behalf of a money-lender for a debt of five hundred pounds. Lord Sidmouth and George Canning paid the money between them.

The new Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, was built by Wyatt after the great theatre at Bordeaux, and opened on October 12th, 1812, with Samuel Arnold as manager, but Covent Garden was offering a strong opposition at that time, and a heavy loss was sustained during the first season. The audiences continued to diminish during the second season, and just as the public support was at its lowest ebb, an almost unknown, shabby strolling player named Edmund Kean appeared as Shylock. His success was instantaneous, and within twenty-four hours all London seemed to be talking of this brilliant "discovery." Arnold lost no time in showing his appreciation: fifty pounds was presented to Kean and immediate arrangements were made for him to appear as Richard III. In this rôle he scored another great success. Byron wrote in his diary "Just returned from seeing Kean in *Richard*. By Jove, he is a soul! Life, nature, truth, without exaggeration or diminution."

Edmund Kean [1787-1833] was the illegitimate son of Anne Carey, a strolling player. She deserted him when he was a baby, and he was picked up in a doorway in Frith Street, Soho, by a couple who gave him shelter during his early years. It appears that his mother claimed him during boyhood—doubtless because he had begun to earn money as a child actor. He was still quite a lad when he ran away from his home in Southwark, walked to Portsmouth, and got a job as a cabin-boy on a ship going to Madeira. He soon found that he disliked the work, so he pretended to have some sort of paralysis, and was taken to a hospital when the ship arrived at that port. Here, the doctors could do nothing for him, and sent him back to England to the care of an uncle. He was sent to a school in Leicester Square, but after a while ran away again and found casual employment in a fair. This led to his becoming a strolling player.

Kean's success at Drury Lane had a wonderful effect upon the patronage of the theatre. His salary was raised to twenty pounds a week, and more substantial gifts were made to him from time to time. For all that, by the year 1819 the proprietors had lost eighty thousand pounds since the opening of the new theatre, so they decided to let the house to Robert Elliston, who had been managing both the Surrey Theatre and a new playhouse erected in 1806 called The Olympic. According to H. B. Baker he took

over on terms that were "simply ruinous": the rent was ten thousand two hundred pounds a year, exclusive of rates, and there were six hundred and thirty-five perpetual free admissions. However, Elliston was lucky at first with several considerable financial (but not artistic) successes. In 1822 he spent twenty-two thousand pounds on internal alterations and decorations, but four years later saw him in the bankruptcy court.

Next came an American named Stephen Price, who took over the theatre at an annual rent of ten thousand six hundred pounds, but paid—nothing! Then followed a succession of lessees, most of whom lost money and allowed the artistic standard of the house to sink to any level to snatch an occasional profit. As the years dragged on, circuses ousted legitimate drama, pantomimes and spectacular extravaganzas were presented more and more frequently, and Drury Lane would have degenerated into a common music-hall but for the regular productions of opera. In 1852 its rent had dropped to three thousand five hundred pounds a year.

#### KEMBLE AND MRS. SIDDONS AT COVENT GARDEN

The nineteenth century started well at Covent Garden because George Frederick Cooke had established a great reputation there in Shakespeare. He might have done wonders had he not been so fond of drink. Over and over again he arrived at the theatre completely intoxicated and would excuse himself by pleading illness. At one performance he broke down helplessly drunk, and tried to fool the audience by placing his hands upon his heart and exclaiming pathetically, "My old complaint, ladies and gentlemen, my old complaint." The whole house burst into a roar of laughter.

The Covent Garden company was greatly strengthened when in 1803 John Kemble forsook Drury Lane and joined them, and again when Mrs. Siddons followed him shortly afterwards. Then London went almost crazy over a boy prodigy named Master Betty, who received fifty pounds a night. That the boy was clever cannot be denied, but the absurd craze that packed vast, suffocating crowds into the Covent Garden Theatre night after night to see him shows what stupid, capricious audiences the managers had to cater for in those difficult days. Within a couple of years this lad was entirely forgotten.

Covent Garden was destroyed by fire on September 30th, 1808 with a tremendous loss of property. Mrs. Siddons and her brother lost their entire wardrobes. But by the middle of the following year another fine theatre had been built by Smirke,

considerably larger than the old one, at a cost of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds. Its proscenium was forty-two feet wide and thirty-six feet high, and the stage measured sixty-eight feet by eighty-two. The auditorium was fifty-one feet by fifty-two, with four tiers; the whole house accommodating nearly three thousand people.

The heavy expenses incurred in building the new theatre necessitated an increase in the prices of admission, but on the opening night—September 18th, 1809—when Kemble addressed the audience, he was greeted with angry shouts of “Old Prices!” This was the outbreak of the “Old Price Riots.” Not a word of the play could be heard that evening: there was a continual commotion in the house, and finally the Riot Act was read from the stage and the police and military had to be called in. To Kemble’s dismay, this went on night after night: everybody seemed to object to the increased charges and willingly took part in the disturbances, and after almost two months of uproar, the prices had to be reduced to the old rates.

On September 23rd, 1813, the nineteen-year-old Catherine Stephens made her débüt as Mandane in Arne’s *Artaxerxes*. This talented singer who had been born in Park Street, Grosvenor Square, in 1794, had already thrilled the provinces with her sweet soprano voice. She excelled in opera for over twenty years, and then retired to marry the octogenarian Earl of Essex.

Mrs. Siddons announced her intention of retiring in 1812, and a farewell performance of *Macbeth* was advertised for June 29th of that year. On this occasion the audience demanded that the play should end with her sleep-walking scene, so that this last great impression of her should be left in their minds. Nevertheless, she made several incidental appearances afterwards, chiefly at benefit performances: she played ten nights in Edinburgh, for instance, for the benefit of her children. Her last appearance on the stage was on June 9th, 1819. She died at her house in Upper Baker Street on June 8th, 1831, and was buried in Paddington Churchyard.

William Charles Macready [1793–1873] made his first London appearance at Covent Garden on September 16th, 1816, having previously distinguished himself as Romeo at Birmingham.

John Kemble retired in 1817 and left his share in Covent Garden to his brother Charles, but difficulties arose, several of the leading members of the company left, and by 1829 the theatre was in very low water indeed. Disaster was averted by the sudden appearance

and great popularity of Charles Kemble's daughter Fanny, although she was not a great actress.

A notable date during the next decade is March 25th, 1833, when Edmund Kean and his son Charles played together as Othello and Iago. H. B. Baker in *The London Stage* describes the event thus :

"The house was crammed to suffocation. Brandy had long since shattered the reputation, the genius, and the health of the great actor. He had been very ill through the winter, and was utterly unfit to sustain the fatigue and excitement of such a night; but he went through the part, dying as he went, until he came to the 'farewell,' in which in the old days he used to stir the very souls of the spectators; he broke down on the words 'Othello's occupation's gone.' Then, gasping for breath, he began 'Be sure thou prove . . .' but unable to proceed, he fell upon his son's shoulder moaning 'I am dying . . . speak to them for me.' And so the curtain descended upon him for ever."

During these dismal years the management of Covent Garden was constantly changing, and the prestige of the theatre was sinking as low as that of Drury Lane. The public seemed quite apathetic : Italian opera was all the rage and nobody seemed to care a jot about legitimate drama. For a couple of years, Alfred Bunn, lessee of Drury Lane, took over the Covent Garden Theatre. In the first volume of his book *The Stage* [1840] he writes :

"The death of Mr. Kean diminished most seriously the effective force of their (the two theatres') *Dramatis Personæ*; other members of it were about to disperse themselves in different directions—some emigrating, some retiring, some maintaining expectations too extravagant to be listened to, and such as could only be kept up through a continued rivalry of the two houses. . . . In the opinion of the most experienced men attached to the profession, there seemed to be no other means of saving them from impending annihilation, than by uniting them under one management."

This plan, however, did not give satisfaction, and after two years Covent Garden was taken over by a man named Osbaldiston, who tried to get better houses by reducing the prices of admission. But the public continued to display nothing but cold indifference. We are told in Wilson's *Noctes Ambrosianæ* that gentlemen who

formerly thought it a crime not to go to the theatre would ask "Whereabouts is Covent Garden Theatre?"

Macready took over the management on September 30th, 1837, with a good company, including an opera staff and a company of pantomimists, yet by Christmas he had lost three thousand pounds. Carrying on with revivals of Shakespeare, he attracted large audiences with splendid productions of *The Tempest* and *Henry V*, but still failed to pay his way, and in the summer of 1839 gave up the management.

Four years later we find the theatre being rented by the Anti-Corn-Law League for a bazaar, and during the years 1844 to 1846 it was used for masked balls. Its interior was then reconstructed by Albano, and it reopened as "The Royal Italian Opera House" for a "more perfect representation of the lyric drama than has yet been attained in this country," but on March 4th, 1856, it was again burnt to the ground.

#### BENJAMIN WEBSTER AT THE HAYMARKET

The "Little Theatre in Haymarket" had now become known simply as "The Haymarket." It was completely rebuilt in 1820 at a cost of twenty thousand pounds, and opened in July, 1821, with *The Rivals* (Sheridan). Unlike the two greater theatres, this house prospered steadily, particularly after Benjamin Webster became the lessee in 1829.

Most of the theatres at that time were abolishing the old proscenium doors and also the apron, the part of the stage that still protruded several feet into the pit—a relic of the Shakespearean stage. This was done at the Haymarket in 1843, for an advertisement at that time informs us that :

" During the recess, the theatre has undergone Extensive alterations : the Proscenium has been entirely remodelled, and the whole of the Interior decorated in the most Costly and Elegant Style. By a curtailment of the useless portion of the Stage in front of the Curtain, and advancing the Orchestra and Lights near the Actors and Scenic Effects, the Lessee has been enabled to appropriate the portion so obtained to form a certain number of Orchestra Stalls, which can be retained for the parties taking them the whole of the Evening."

One of Webster's few mistakes was made in 1844 when he offered a prize of five hundred pounds in a competition for the best comedy. The judges made the award to Mrs. Gore, the novelist, for a play called *Quid pro Quo*. It was an utter failure!

## THE KING'S THEATRE OPERA AND BALLET

The great popularity of the opera gave the rebuilt King's Theatre an advantage from the start, though the number of Italians in the company made it difficult to introduce works that were not of the Italian school. The first of Mozart's operas to be heard in London, *La Clemenza de Tito*, was produced here in 1806, but the company treated it with little sympathy, and it soon dropped out of the repertoire. *Cosi fan Tutte* was first heard here in 1811, and *The Magic Flute* followed soon after, but the latter failed at its first hearing owing to the inadequacy of the company.

Madame Catalini, the famous soprano who introduced Mozart's *Figaro* to London, first appeared here in 1806 at a fee of two thousand guineas for the season. When she increased her fee to five thousand guineas for the second season the manager objected that there would be nothing left to pay the other singers. Her husband instantly retorted, "What else do you want when you have my wife's talent? She and four or five puppets are enough." Her demands continued to increase until in 1813 the King's Theatre could no longer bid for her. She was then clearing ten thousand pounds a season at concerts. Some idea of her husband's avarice may be gained from the fact that on one occasion she was a guest of the Marquis of Buckingham and sang seventeen songs during the evening to a few of his friends. The next day the Marquis received a bill from her husband for seventeen hundred pounds.

In 1816 another superb singer, Madame Vestris, appeared at the King's Theatre, but from the difficulties encountered by the ever-changing managers, it seems that this house, too, had ceased to show a profit. The year 1817 saw the first production of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, and Rossini's *Barber of Seville* followed in 1818. In the same year the auditorium was reconstructed in the shape of a horse-shoe by Nash and Repton, who also added the colonnades a little later. This work cost fifty thousand pounds, but failed to bring prosperity. During his seven years as manager, Ebers, a bookseller, lost over three thousand pounds every season, but this is perhaps explained by the following quotation from a theatrical journal of that time :

"When a foreigner views the imposing exterior of the opera-house, its numerous columns, its splendid piazzas, and its colossal dimensions, he reasonably expects that the interior will exhibit corresponding attractions, and hurries to the theatre buoyant with the hope of anticipated delight. He pays his half-guinea

and is introduced into this fancied temple of elegance and grandeur. The filthy condition of the corridors, where the dirt of ages reposes in undisturbed tranquility, secure from the lustrations of a scrubbing brush, soon convinces our enthusiast that no lord of the vestibule protects the flowing train of a countess from plebian pollution. He hurries on and fixes his gaze upon that venerable specimen of the antique, the drop-curtain, whose faded hues and tarnished dinginess are surpassed only by the murky sails of a coal-lighter. The indulgent spectator overlooks these glaring violations of common decency, and recollecting that the musical department is under the direction of a committee of noblemen of acknowledged taste and ample fortune, he makes sure that this union of talent and wealth will procure him the highest treat that *a fanatico per musica* can possibly desire. But here again he is doomed to disappointment, his high-wrought expectations terminate in a mixed feeling of scorn, contempt and indignation. . . . How long must the admirers of Italian music be subjected to the evils arising from the incapacity or misconduct of Mr. Ebers?"

It was Ebers, however, who in 1821 succeeded in bringing to London some of the famous stars of the Parisian ballet. Lengthy negotiations had to be conducted through the British Embassy in Paris, and at last a small company, including Albert, Noblet, Coulon and Bias came over. Their phenomenal success stirred up a new, hysterical craze in the world of fashion. Noblet, the *première danseuse* was the sensation of the season: invitations from the nobility were showered upon her, and society, gossip tells us, simply worshipped at her feet! According to Ebers' accounts, the ballet cost more than the opera. Madame Camporese, the immensely popular *prima donna* received only one thousand six hundred and fifty pounds, whereas Albert drew one thousand seven hundred and eighty-five and Noblet one thousand five hundred and thirty-seven. Ballet reached a new peak of perfection when Taglioni, Carlotta Grisi and Fanny Elssler came upon the scene.

Ebers was followed by Laporte and Laurent in 1827, and at the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837, the King's Theatre was renamed "Her Majesty's." Meanwhile, opera continued to be the mainstay of this and many other London theatres. The names of many great artists catch our eyes as we turn the pages of theatrical history: Pasta, Sontag, Malibran, Lablache, Rubini, Tamburini, Persiani and Mario, to mention only a few, were all

famous in their day, but the limits of this book make it impossible to enlarge upon them.

### NEW LEGISLATION

So far, the story of the English theatre has centred around the two great "patent" houses, but during the first half of the nineteenth century the number of minor théâtres grew steadily. At first they were allowed to open only during the summer months when Drury Lane and Covent Garden were closed, but gradually their seasons lengthened, and in time they became serious rivals of the patent theatres. A veritable feud was carried on for years, with the public and press taking sides in every dispute. Agitations against the old Licensing Act multiplied, and finally, after such men as Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton had pressed the matter, the government appointed a committee to investigate the position of all the theatres, and this led to the passing of a Bill in 1843 abolishing the patents and placing all the theatres in London under the control of the Lord Chamberlain.

### THE LYCEUM AND THE OLYMPIC

The Lyceum was built originally as an art gallery in 1765, and it was not until 1794 that its interior was reconstructed as a theatre by Dr. Arnold, the composer. Even then, it was used for non-theatrical purposes: concerts, exhibitions and the like, and it did not become a proper playhouse until 1809. It is interesting to note that Madame Tussaud used it for her waxworks when she first came to England in 1802.

When Drury Lane was burnt down in 1809, its company obtained permission to use the Lyceum while the new Theatre Royal was being built. During the summer months, of course, the theatre was vacant, so Arnold's son, Samuel James, obtained a licence to produce English opera there. Thus in 1810 the Lyceum became known as The English Opera House. It was rebuilt in 1815 with an elaborate interior including a winter-garden measuring seventy-two feet by forty feet and containing a splendid variety of flowers and shrubs. Two years later, gas-lighting was installed, first on the stage and then in the auditorium. Financial difficulties induced the management to experiment with a "twice-nightly" system, but it found no sympathy with the public, and was abandoned.

The English Opera House was burnt down on February 10th, 1830, and the company had to find a home first at the Adelphi and

later at the Olympic while a new theatre was being built. It was completed in 1834 and just as the last piece of scaffolding was being removed an amazing discovery was made—the architect had forgotten to put any stairs to the gallery! A wooden staircase was hurriedly added and the house opened in July of that year with John Barnett's opera *The Mountain Sylph*.

The first Promenade Concerts ever heard in this country were given at this theatre during the winter of 1838-39. They were introduced as a novelty from Paris, but achieved nothing like the fame and popularity of the wonderful series commenced by the late Sir Henry Wood at the Queen's Hall towards the close of the century.

A gallant effort to establish truly national opera was made at the Lyceum in 1840 but failed pitifully, and in less than two years the theatre became a home for performing lions and other horrors.

The abolition of the monopoly of the patent theatres in 1843 gave the house a chance to recover, and early in the following year its name was changed from The English Opera House to "The Theatre Royal Lyceum," though most people continued to refer to it as simply "The Lyceum." A production of *Henry IV* started the new regime, but the public was in no mood for indifferent performances of Shakespeare, and it was a miserable failure. The first real success here was a dramatized version of Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which ran for three months with Sam Emery, Alfred Wigan, Frank Matthews and Keeley in the cast.

Madame Vestris took over the management on October 18th, 1847, installed a brilliant comedy company, and secured overwhelming successes with such plays as *Box and Cox*, and Boucicault's *Used Up*. Almost overnight the Lyceum became one of the most fashionable resorts in London. James Robinson Planché, the burlesque writer and designer, made his greatest hit here with a transformation scene in *The Island of Jewels*, in 1849.

Philip Astley opened his Olympic Pavilion in 1806 with a licence for music, dancing, pantomime, burlettas and equestrian exhibitions. This crude house, known also as "Astley's Middlesex Amphitheatre," was built almost entirely of old timbers salvaged from a decrepit French warship, and was an utter failure; so he sold it in 1813 to Elliston, who renamed it "Little Drury Lane," but within a year had to revert to the original name—The Olympic Pavilion—owing to licensing difficulties. In 1815 he installed gas lighting in part of the house; a great novelty at that time. Three

years later he rebuilt the theatre, but within twelve months was obliged to let it because he became the manager of Drury Lane.

The Olympic then entered upon a period of vicissitudes under various managers until Madame Vestris took it in 1830 and found favour with light comedies, burlesques, extravaganzas and so forth, cleverly staged to appeal to the more sophisticated. Charles Mathews, in his autobiography, says of her 'productions :

"There was introduced for the first time in England that reform in all theatrical matters which has since been adopted at every theatre in the kingdom. Drawing rooms were fitted up like drawing rooms, and fitted with care and taste. Two chairs no longer indicated that two persons were to be seated. A claret-coloured coat, salmon-coloured trousers, with a broad black stripe, a sky-blue neckcloth with a large paste brooch, and a cut-steel eye-glass with a pink ribbon, no longer marked the light-comedy gentleman; and the public at once recognized and appreciated the changes."

Madame Vestris was born at 72 Dean Street, Soho, in 1797, and married Auguste Vestris, a dancer and ballet-master of the King's Theatre, in 1813. Four years later he deserted her. She made her first appearance in Italian opera at the King's Theatre in 1815 and rose to fame very quickly. She married Charles James Mathews [1803-1878] in 1838, and they both made an American tour before leaving the Olympic for Covent Garden. (Mathews had made his first stage appearance at the Olympic in 1835.)

Various managers tried to carry on the Olympic after Madame Vestris, but without much success, though it should be recorded that Gustavus Brooke made his début at this theatre as Othello in 1846. Three years later it was burnt down, and a new theatre was erected in 1849.

#### SADLER'S WELLS AQUATIC DISPLAYS

The nineteenth century at Sadler's Wells saw the development of the aquatic displays that made this theatre famous. A colossal tank, fed by the New River, was built beneath the stage, and all types of spectacular shows and nautical dramas were produced there on elaborate lines. In one of the latter, *The Siege of Gibraltar*, H. B. Baker says that :

"... real vessels floated on real water for the bombardment of the fortress; the heroine fell from the rocks into the sea, and her lover plunged after her; there were a naval battle and a ship on

fire, from which sailors sprang into the waves to escape from the flames, and in another scene a child was cast into the water and rescued by a Newfoundland dog."

The most famous actor connected with Sadler's Wells at this time was Joseph Grimaldi, born on December 18th, 1779, at Stanhope Street, Clare Market, son of an Italian actor. At the age of three he appeared at Sadler's Wells as an infant dancer, and then got a pantomime engagement at Drury Lane. He was frequently seen on the stage as a boy, and in later years became the most famous clown of the age. Visits were made to Dublin, Bath, Bristol, Liverpool and Manchester, and in London he was often engaged at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. He died in 1837.

One of the best managers of Sadler's Wells during the first half of the nineteenth century was that famous actor of the old school of tragedy, Samuel Phelps, who took advantage of the new legislation in 1843, and began staging Shakespeare. He also put a stop to rowdiness in the gallery by instantly expelling unruly patrons.

Samuel Phelps was born at Plymouth Dock (now Devonport) on February 13th, 1804, educated locally and at Saltash, and entered the office of *The Plymouth Herald* as a "reading boy" when at the age of sixteen he was left as an orphan. In less than a year he had found a reader's job in London on the staff of *The Globe* and *The Sun*, and then began to take an interest in the theatre. He took part in amateur theatricals, and was still an amateur when he first appeared at The Olympic. Joining a Yorkshire company, he made something of a name in Sheffield, and later toured all over the north of England and Scotland before returning to play in various theatres on the south coast. This led to an engagement at Covent Garden, and to a brilliant career in the capital. He died in November, 1878, at Coopersale, near Epping.

#### THE SURREY AND THE "OLD VIC"

As far as we are concerned, there is little worth recording in the history of the Surrey Theatre until Elliston undertook the management in 1827 and produced Douglas Jerrold's *Black-Ey'd Susan* there on January 26th, 1829, with T. P. Cooke as William. Then, to quote *The Athenaeum*:

"All London went over the water, and Cooke became a personage in society, as Garrick had been in the days of Goodman's Fields. Covent Garden borrowed the play and engaged the

actor, for an after-piece. A hackney cab carried the triumphant William in his blue jacket and white trousers from the Obelisk to Bow Street, and Mayfair maidens wept over the stirring situations and laughed over the searching dialogue, which had moved, an hour before, the laughter and tears of the Borough. On the three hundredth night of representation the walls of the theatre were illuminated, and vast multitudes filled the thoroughfare . . . . testimonials were got up for Elliston and Cooke on the glory of its success, but Jerrold's share of the gain was slight —about seventy pounds of the many thousands it realised for the management. With unapproachable meanness, Elliston abstained from presenting the youthful writer with the value of a toothpick. . . .”

Elliston's successor, Osbaldiston, enjoyed a similar stroke of luck with Fitzball's *Jonathan Bradford*, which ran for even longer than Jerrold's play. Unlike *Black-Ey'd Susan* it was a very poor specimen of a play.

The Surrey Theatre was destroyed by fire in 1865, and a new and pleasant theatre was erected in its place soon afterwards.

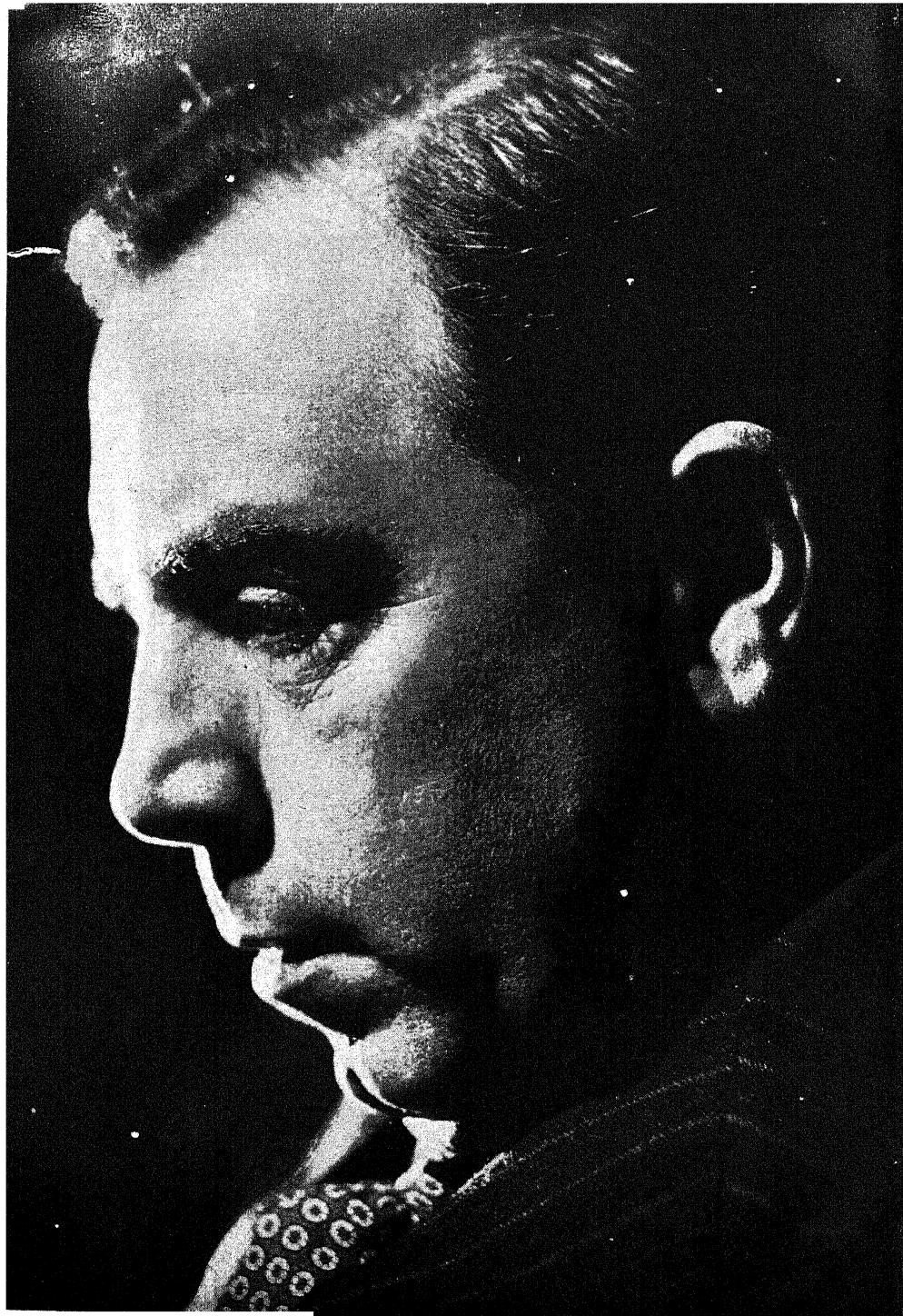
The names of Princess Charlotte and her husband Prince Leopold headed the list of subscribers who built the Royal Cobourg Theatre. It was a fine-looking building, and possessed a novelty that fascinated its patrons for years: a mirror curtain measuring thirty-six feet by thirty-two, enclosed in a gilt frame, that could be raised and lowered almost as easily as the present day asbestos curtain.

The Royal Cobourg opened in May, 1818, and for several years many of the most distinguished actors and actresses played there, but in time its patrons grew tired of its squalid surroundings, and it became a favourite haunt of the more uncouth type of audience. That, however, was not until it was renamed the Royal Victoria Theatre in 1833.

As it deteriorated the “Old Vic,” as everybody called it, acquired a reputation for extravagant melodrama which was lapped up with relish by the rabble of Lambeth. Charles Mathews tells us :

“ The lower orders rush there in mobs, and in shirt sleeves, applaud frantically, drink ginger beer, munch apples, crack nuts, call the actors by their Christian names, and throw them orange peel and apples by way of bouquets.”

Brawls and other disorders were a frequent occurrence there, and



74. J. B. PRIESTLEY

on one evening in 1858 sixteen persons were killed in a panic caused by a false alarm of fire.

### THE ADELPHI

The original Adelphi was a small theatre called The Sans Pareil, erected in 1806 by a colour merchant named John Scott at a cost of ten thousand pounds. He opened it in November of that year for variety entertainments which generally concluded with firework displays. Though an amateur with nothing but a shrewd knowledge of the sort of amusement the rank and file enjoyed, Scott prospered, and in due course was able to present some sort of dramatic performances, most of which were written and produced by his clever and pretty daughter. Having made a small fortune out of the theatre, he gained fifteen thousand pounds profit in one stroke of the pen by selling the whole concern for twenty-five thousand pounds to two partners named Jones and Rodwell, who renamed it The Adelphi.

Advertisements at that time proclaimed that considerable improvements had been made at The Adelphi and that "the brilliant effect of the gas chandelier suspended from the dome is the subject of universal admiration."

Jones and Rodwell raised the artistic standard to some extent, and after further structural improvements and decorations in 1821, the Adelphi became one of the most fashionable theatres in London. Its popularity was probably established by the long and very successful run of *Life in London, or Tom and Jerry*, a dramatized version of the extremely popular book by the journalist Pierce Egan. Robert Keeley, an almost unknown actor at that time, appeared in this production.

In 1825 the management of the Adelphi passed to Terry and Yates, former members of the Drury Lane and Covent Garden companies, who scored a great success with an adaptation of Fenimore Cooper's famous novel *The Pilot*. The book derided the British, but in the play it was the Americans who were ridiculed, and Scott, in his diary, tells us that "The Americans were so much displeased that they attempted a row, which rendered the piece doubly attractive to the seamen of Wapping, who came up and crowded the house night after night to support the honour of the British flag."

The Adelphi was enlarged in 1827, and shortly afterwards Charles Mathews paid seventeen thousand pounds for Terry's share, but although a high standard of drama was maintained,

financial difficulties became increasingly heavy, and the theatre rarely paid its way until a man named Gladstone took it over.

It was in this theatre that John Reeve [1799-1838] won the affection of his audiences. He was born on Ludgate Hill, son of a hosier, and after several years in business became an actor, but secured only minor parts for quite a time. Then he appeared as Jerry Hawthorn in *Life in London*, and from that time enjoyed an enviable run of successes in various London theatres. He visited America in 1835, "gaining much money but little reputation," and returned to the Adelphi at a salary of forty pounds a week, but declined steadily owing to excessive drinking.

Another tremendously popular actor at the Adelphi was Edward Wright [1813-1859], who succeeded Reeve. He was born in London, but gained most of his experience in Birmingham and Bristol. Returning to London he first appeared as a comedian at the new St. James's Theatre in 1837, and secured his first engagement at the Adelphi in the following year. He had a remarkable gift of sending his audience into fits of laughter over passages that in themselves were only mildly funny.

Madame Celeste and Benjamin Webster took charge of the Adelphi in 1844, and controlled its fortunes throughout one of the best periods of its history.

Madame Celeste was born in Paris about the year 1810, made her first appearance in New York in 1827, and came to England three years later in search of ballet and pantomime engagements. After playing in various minor theatres, she went on a tour through Italy, Germany and Spain before Bunn engaged her for Covent Garden and Drury Lane. Her second visit to America in 1834 was a great success, and she returned with a fortune of forty thousand pounds. She became associated with Webster in 1843 in the management of the Theatre Royal, Liverpool, and then went with him to the Adelphi.

Benjamin Webster [1797-1882] was a native of Bath. He refused a commission in the Army, and ran away from home "to play Harlequin, small speaking parts, and second violin in the orchestra" at Warwick. After various appearances in the provinces and in Ireland he came to town and appeared at the Cobourg Theatre in 1819, from which he progressed by way of the Regency and Lyceum, to Drury Lane. H. B. Baker says in *The London Stage*:

"Webster was an actor of consummate ability, and would have been an acquisition even to the Comédie Française in its best

days. There was greater variety in Webster than perhaps in any other actor of his generation; his range of character was very great. . . .”

Baker also declares that :

“ It was by the acting, and the acting only, that the old Adelphi won its fame; little care or expense was bestowed upon mounting its pieces, its dresses were usually shabby, and its scenes and sets were little elaborated. . . .”

### THE PRINCE OF WALES'S THEATRE

This theatre in Tottenham Street, Tottenham Court Road, was known by about half a dozen names—if not more. It started early in the nineteenth century as a concert hall, and was purchased by Harry Beverley for the modest sum of three hundred and fifteen pounds in December, 1814. He made various improvements and opened it shortly afterwards as The Regency Theatre of Varieties.

In 1820 we find a Mr. Brunton taking it over, renaming it The West London Theatre, and introducing a much better class of entertainment. With no licence at all, he calmly staged *She Stoops to Conquer* and *The School for Scandal* by calling them burlettas!

Other people took this theatre with varying degrees of success or failure—mostly failure—during the ensuing years. In 1829 we find it being advertised as The Tottenham Street Theatre, and in 1831 being altered and renamed The Queen's. Two years later it becomes The Fitzroy Theatre, and after another couple of years it reverts to the title The Queen's. This juggling of names goes on *ad lib.* for the next three or four years.

In 1839 a scenic artist named C. T. James took it over and began staging highly-coloured melodramas to a cut-price audience. In the profession it became known as The Dust Hole, and its reputation stank rather worse than the fried fish shops in the neighbourhood.

### THE STRAND THEATRE

“ Rayner's New Subscription Theatre in the Strand,” as it was originally known, was fashioned out of a meeting hall in 1832. The lack of a licence never seemed to worry the manager, who specialized in burlesque, and had no qualms about attaching that appellation to anything he fancied.

This house soon became known as The New Strand Theatre, but it had a chequered career. The Lord Chamberlain closed it in

1834, but it was promptly re-opened by Mrs. Waylett, who admitted her patrons free of charge upon the purchase of confectionery! The Lord High Executioner closed it again in 1835, but within a year it was staging burlesques.

There is little to record apart from a succession of insignificant theatrical experiments until William Farren took the theatre in 1849 and began producing legitimate drama with a good company, including Mrs. Glover, Mrs. Stirling, Leigh Murray, Mrs. Alfred Philips, and Henry Farren.

### THE ST. JAMES'S AND PRINCESS'S THEATRES

Early in the nineteenth century there was a fine tenor singer named John Braham, a Londoner born of German-Jewish parents. His voice enabled him to accumulate a considerable fortune. In his later years he became obsessed with a craze for theatrical management, and spent forty thousand pounds in buying the Colosseum in Regent's Park, and thirty thousand pounds in building a theatre on the site of an old hotel in King Street, St. James's. Both speculations were failures, but it is only with the latter that we are concerned.

He opened The St. James's Theatre, as he called it, on December 14th, 1835, with an opera by Mrs. G. A. à'Beckett, *Agnes Sorel*, but despite the fact that he was in the leading rôle himself, it failed—and so did all his other attempts to stir a thoroughly apathetic public. In the following year he let the theatre to a French company, but soon returned to the fray himself with *The Strange Gentleman*, founded on one of the *Sketches by Boz*. This ran for fifty nights or so, and induced Braham to persuade Dickens to collaborate with John Hullah in the writing of an English opera. The result was *Village Coquettes*, but it made no impression whatever. Even a farce by Dickens, *Is She His Wife?* produced at the St. James's in 1837, barely paid its way, although adaptations of his novels were generally well patronized.

By the end of 1838 Braham was ruined, but he was not beaten, and although he was well over sixty, he made a prolonged tour through America and earned enough money to provide for his old age.

The theatre continued to break the hearts of its managers. Drama was a ruinous undertaking for anyone to attempt in London, and the St. James's, like its older rivals, was used for anything that would attract a crowd: performing animals, acrobats and so forth. Everybody followed Fashion, and Fashion followed the

young Queen Victoria, whose artistic propensities made her attend a circus at Drury Lane Theatre twice in one week.

At the time of the Queen's marriage, the St. James's was renamed The Prince's, and a handsome profit was made out of an execrable German opera company. They drew large crowds who knew nothing about opera, cared less, and had but one thought in their silly heads: to be fashionable, and loyal to the German prince.

In 1842 an intelligent Mr. Mitchell of Bond Street became the lessee of the theatre, changed its name back to the St. James's, and specialized for twelve years with French companies. He brought over many of the finest artists of the Parisian stage, including Déjazet, Frederick Lemaître, Ravel, Levasseur, Mademoiselle Plessy, and the renowned Rachel.

Until they got to know about her private life, the *élite* rhapsodized over Rachel: she was all the rage in London. One night she was standing in the wings talking to the Duchess of Kent and complained of the cold. In an instant, the Duchess removed her own beautiful shawl and put it around the actress. When she was ill some of the greatest physicians in the land attended her, and issued regular bulletins with great solemnity. On her return to the stage, she found the Queen and the Queen Dowager waiting to congratulate her on her recovery. Her Majesty presented her with a wonderful bracelet inscribed: "From Victoria to Mademoiselle Rachel."

The Princess's Theatre was originally an exhibition hall on the north side of Oxford Street, but in 1840 a silversmith named Hamlet converted it into a theatre during a burst of amateur enthusiasm for public entertainment. It was then used first for promenade concerts and later for opera. In 1850 it was taken over by Charles Kean and Robert Keeley who opened with *Twelfth Night*, and then embarked upon a long series of Shakespearean revivals and excellent productions of French drama. The latter created quite a stir, and had a considerable effect upon the English theatre generally at this period of its history.

#### DRAMATISTS OF THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

There were few professional playwrights in the first half of the nineteenth century whose work calls for any special mention in a short book of this nature.

James Sheridan Knowles [1784-1862], a native of Cork, tried the Army, and then the medical and teaching professions before he

became a playwright. The great Edmund Kean played with notable success in his *Leo* in 1810, and again in his *Virginius* in 1820 at Covent Garden. Knowles's best play *The Hunchback*, was first produced at Covent Garden in 1832. Later in life he became a Baptist preacher.

We have already made the acquaintance of Douglas William Jerrold [1803-1857]. A Londoner, and son of an actor, he went to sea for two years, returned home to become a printer's apprentice, and in 1819 found a job as a compositor on the staff of the *Sunday Monitor*. Then he became a journalist and was engaged to write plays for the Cobourg Theatre at the princely salary of three pounds a week. After the success of his *Black Ey'd Susan* his remuneration was increased substantially and he began writing for other and more important theatres, making steady progress until his noteworthy play *The Bride of Ludgate* was produced at Drury Lane in 1831. In later years he distinguished himself more as a journalist.

Walter Savage Landor [1775-1864] was born at Warwick, educated at Rugby and Cambridge, and inherited a comfortable fortune in 1805. He was a headstrong, recalcitrant character who might have produced some really remarkable works had he been obliged to write for a living. His principal dramatic works are *Count Julian* [1812] and a trilogy: *Andrea of Hungary*, *Giovanna of Naples* and *Fra Rupert*.

The plays of such people as Henry Hart Milman, Sir Thomas Talfourd, Edward Fitzball, J. B. Buckstone, and Charles Reade seldom rise above mediocrity when we judge them by modern standards, although many of them were very popular in their day and are of some significance in theatrical history.

There were so few playwrights of real ability during this period that the greater poets and novelists were induced to attempt dramatic work, but one cannot help feeling that some of it was wasted effort.

Macready persuaded Robert Browning [1812-1889] to write for the stage. His tragedy *Strafford* was produced at Covent Garden in 1837, but neither this nor *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, produced six years later, found much response in the theatre. Little interest, too, was shown when his *Colombe's Birthday* was first performed in 1853.

On the other hand Edward Bulwer-Lytton [1803-1873], the famous novelist, achieved considerable success in the theatre with his romantic comedy *The Lady of Lyons*, which was produced in

1838. In the following year his *Richelieu* also found favour, and in 1840 he drew good houses again with the comedy *Money*.

The dramatic works of Lord Byron [1788-1824] commence with his *Manfred* [1817] and include the tragedy *Sardanapalus* [1821] and *The Two Foscari*, which was published in the same year. His most successful work in the theatre was his tragedy *Werner*, in which Macready made a very great impression.

Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Lamb, Scott and Maturin all tried to write for the stage, but rarely met with any success, though Shelley's tragedy *The Cenci* and Maturin's tragedy *Bertram* were both well received.

#### EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS

To conclude this chapter, let us see how the theatres changed during this period of roughly fifty years. At the beginning of the century the evening's performance in the average London theatre occupied between five and six hours. The curtain rose at six-thirty, and the house rarely closed before midnight. The programme generally consisted of two or even three works. Very often the evening opened with a short, light comedy; then there was a full-length drama, and finally a short farce or a light opera would conclude the performance.

Grand opera was a law unto itself, and generally commenced at eight o'clock. The length of the performance varied considerably, but the people were very insistent upon getting their money's worth.

Towards the middle of the century the London theatres began to shorten their performances considerably, though it is recorded that when in 1840 Madame Vestris began closing her theatre at eleven o'clock, the audiences were astonished. However, in less than ten years every other manager in town had followed her example.

The comfort of the audience occupied the thoughts of all the managers at this time. Great improvements were made in the seating accommodation, and around 1850 upholstered chairs began to replace the hard wooden forms. When one considers that upholstery was used in the theatres nearly a century ago, it seems all the more incredible that in many theatres today a temporary paralysis of the posterior is still considered to be part of the evening's entertainment.

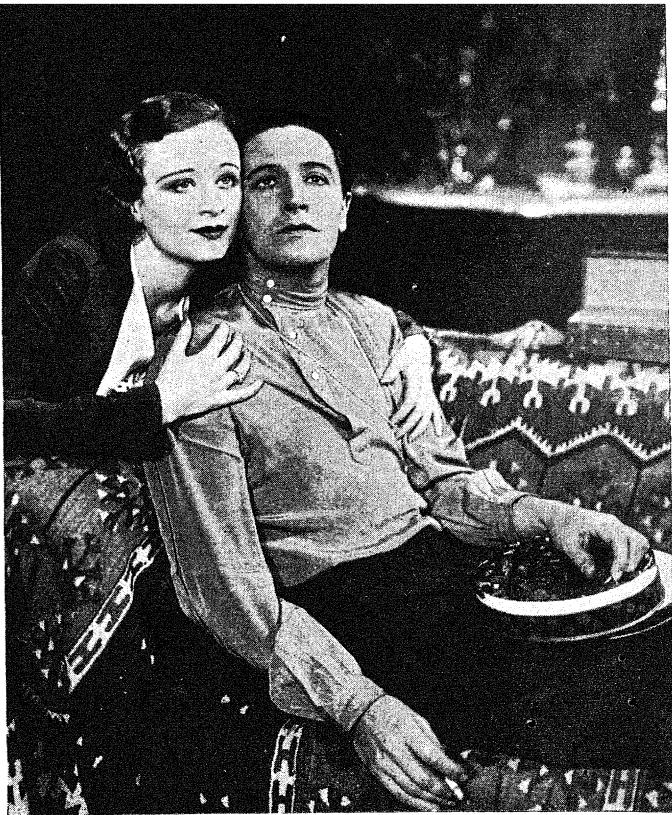
Throughout this period there was steady improvement in the stage settings. More and more use was made of mechanical

devices for the manipulation of scenery, and the painting of it became a highly-specialized art.

We have already noted the introduction of gas lighting in the theatres. This opened up vast possibilities in stage-lighting, though at first the people objected to the fumes that for several years retarded the development of this form of lighting. In time, however, purer gas and better burners reduced the odour to a minimum. When gas was originally installed in the theatres, naked flickering jets provided the illumination, but in a very short while they were fitted with glass chimneys, and then better control of lighting followed quickly.



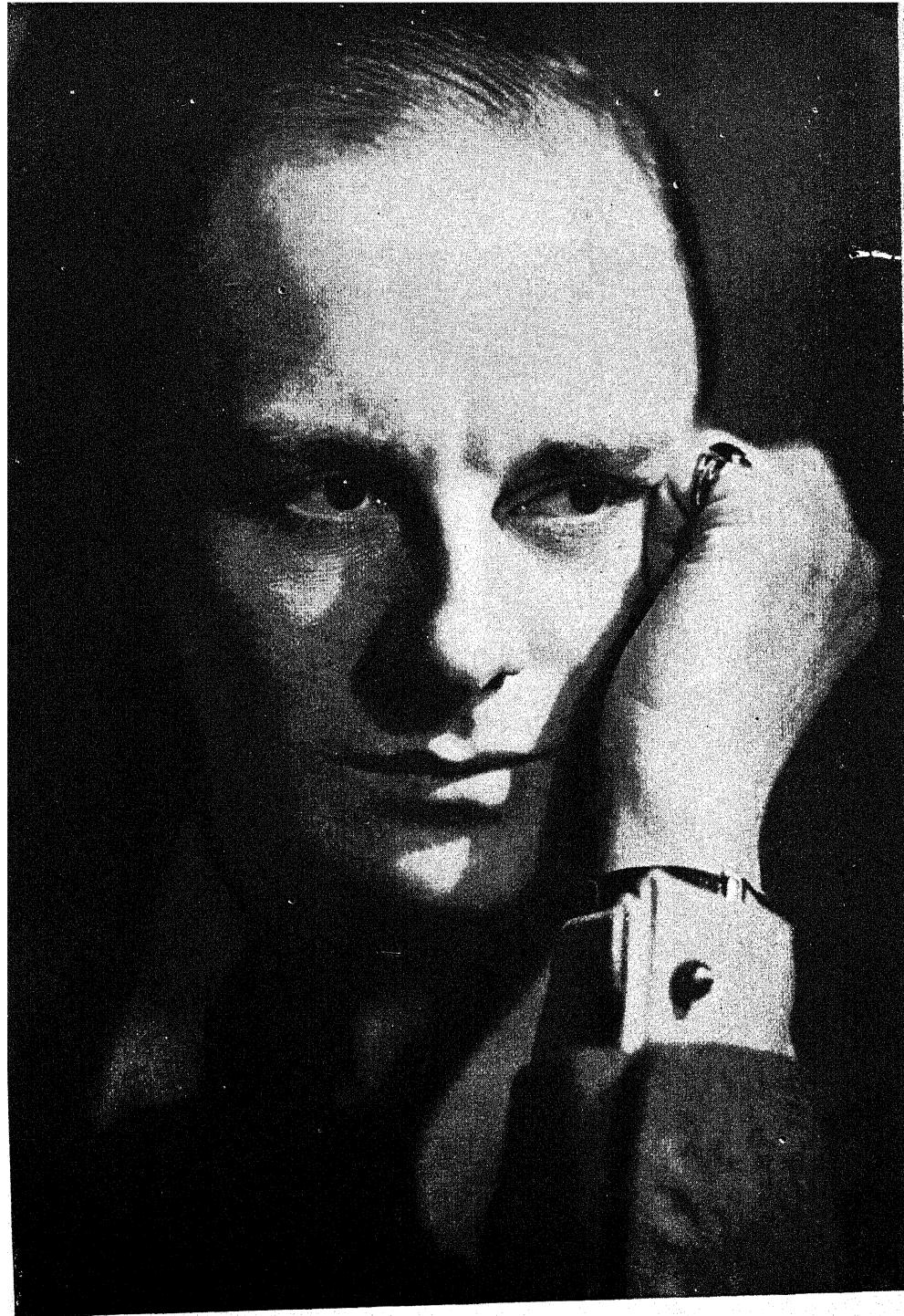
75. MAURICE EVANS and COLIN CLIVE in R. C.  
*Sheriff's Journey's End* (Savoy, 1929)



76. URSULA JEANS and IVOR NOVELLO in Novello's play  
*I Lived with You* (Shaftesbury, 1932)



77. EMLYN WILLIAMS



78. JOHN GIELGUD



79. *Richard of Bordeaux* (Gordon Daviot), produced at the New Theatre in 1933 by John Gielgud, who also played the leading part of *Richard II*. Setting and costumes were by Motley

## Chapter IX

### THE NINETEENTH CENTURY (SECOND HALF)

THE second half of the nineteenth century was a period of change and significant development. It opened with the theatre in a state of utter stagnation, and for something like twenty years the comparatively small number of theatres in existence continued to swallow up the fortunes of the majority of those who were prepared to risk their money in the promotion of drama in this country.

Then came the Bancrofts, Henry Irving and a few other enlightened individuals, and the theatre began to enter into the social life of the masses ; the great middle classes were aroused, and new theatres began to spring up everywhere. Those whose parents had regarded attendance at the theatre as one of the Seven Deadly Sins were to be seen strutting in with their wives for the "respectable" plays, or slinking in without them for the others.

When we come to the last quarter of the century the tremendous increase in the number of theatres will make it impossible for us to go on tracing with any degree of continuity the fortunes of the individual houses, though of course the more important theatres will still figure prominently in our story. To record the history of the dozens of new playhouses in London alone would be impossible in a book of this size, and a lengthy catalogue of productions during the past sixty or seventy years would only prove tedious to the reader, so we shall continue our story with facts drawn here and there to give, as far as possible, a general picture of the theatre as it has progressed right up to the present day.

#### DRURY LANE AND AUGUSTUS HARRIS

Just before Christmas, 1852, E. T. Smith became the lessee of Drury Lane. He opened on Boxing Night with an adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and a pantomime by Blanchard called *Harlequin Hudibras*, and succeeded in making a profit. Then he presented Italian opera at reduced prices, Rachel in *Athalie*, circuses and various novelties, but eventually, like so many of his predecessors, he realised that he was playing a losing game, and retired.

The usual succession of lessees followed, and all were disillusioned in their turn. Edmund Falconer and F. B. Chatterton became joint-managers in 1862 and promptly lost the thirteen thousand pounds they had made with *The Peep o'Day* at the Lyceum. Then Chatterton became the sole lessee and ruled for ten years, thereby giving an impression that he had discovered the secret of making Britain's most historic theatre pay its way. He put on Shakespeare and Byron and plenty of popular old comedies with a good company, including Helen Faucit, who always drew crowded houses, and Walter Montgomery.

In 1868 he produced *The Great City* (Halliday), in which Mrs. Madge Kendal (then Madge Robertson) made her débüt. Edward Stirling in a book published over fifty years ago<sup>1</sup> tells us that: "This realistic piece had the advantage of a real cab and living horse, thieves' dens, and burglars on house-tops escaping by telegraphic wires" and also that as a result "Money came into the treasury, the best token of popularity."

Adaptations of Scott's novels followed this inspiring example of mid-Victorian culture: we are told that Halliday's dramatization of *Ivanhoe* in 1871 with Lilian Neilson as Rebecca was a great success. But did Chatterton pay his way? He gave up, heart-broken, in February, 1879, thirty-six thousand pounds in debt.

Drury Lane was closed for eight months—nobody felt inclined to play with financial fire after Chatterton's experience—and then a very young man named Augustus Harris, son of a former manager of Covent Garden, was bold enough to open it with Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Whether he made a profit or a loss does not really matter, because a few weeks afterwards he was filling the house from top to bottom with a remarkable Christmas pantomime, *Blue Beard*, in which low comedy, shipwrecks, sea serpents, baby elephants and suchlike gladdened the hearts of all the Great Queen's loyal subjects.

With sensational drama, pantomime and other spectacular shows, Harris somehow managed to keep the wolf from the Lane, and, moreover, salved his conscience by popping in Shakespeare now and then together with such works as *She Stoops to Conquer*, *The Rivals*, and so forth,

Opera continued to be the chief attraction for many years at Drury Lane. In 1881 Harris engaged the Saxe-Meinengen Company, causing a sensation which was to be eclipsed within twelve months by Hans Richter and the German Opera Company,

<sup>1</sup> *Old Drury Lane*.

who gave the first production in England of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* and *Tristan und Isolde*. The Carl Rosa Company took the theatre in 1883, and in the ensuing year several English operas were mounted. The famous de Reszke brothers appeared there in 1887, and the year 1895 is noteworthy for the interesting series of comic operas performed by the Ducal Company of Saxe-Cobourg and Gotha.

### COVENT GARDEN REBUILT

Soon after the destruction of the opera house by fire in 1856, Frederick Gye decided to rebuild it at his own expense to the plans of Edward Barry, R.A. The new house—the one we know to-day—took only six months to erect, and cost seventy thousand pounds. It measured one hundred and twenty-seven feet by two hundred and ten, and had a stage ninety feet by eighty-eight.

For the opening night, May 15th, 1858, the Pyne and Harrison company gave an English version of *Les Huguenots*. Madame Patti made her débüt here as Amina in *La Sonnambula* in 1861, and other first appearances included those of Graziani, Tamberlik, Lucca and Albani.

In 1860, by the way, concerts were first given under Gye's auspices in the newly-built Floral Hall adjoining Covent Garden Market.

It seems incredible, but Gounod's *Faust* failed to make any impression upon Gye at that time: he repeatedly refused to produce it. Eventually, this opera was mounted at Her Majesty's and caused such a furore that he was obliged to acknowledge his mistake.

An attempt was made in 1865 to amalgamate Covent Garden and Her Majesty's, and to bring both houses under the management of a "Royal Italian Opera Company Ltd." Nothing came of the project until 1869, and then the union lasted for only two years.

For about ten years or so Covent Garden prospered: the annual profits were always over fifteen thousand pounds notwithstanding the upward trend of the artists' salaries. Wagner's *Lohengrin* was produced in 1875, *Tannhäuser* in the following year, and *Der fliegende Holländer* shortly afterwards.

On November 27th, 1878, Gye was accidentally shot while he was a guest at Ditchley Park, Oxfordshire, and the management of Covent Garden passed to his son Ernest and one of his brothers.

In 1884 the Royal Italian Opera collapsed financially. For

this, several reasons have been put forward, but the chief was probably the attitude of the Philistine public at that time. Fashion still reigned supreme, and very few people really cared about operatic art. They would flock to the opera house when some extravagantly paid *prima donna* was to sing; any new craze or sensation would be greeted with wild enthusiasm; but intelligent, constant interest in the art of opera was beyond the powers of the majority, and the maintenance of a continual stream of costly celebrities would have strained the resources of the most affluent management.

In this country we rarely count our blessings until we lose them, and therefore it is not surprising to find that the failure of the Italian Opera pricked many an artistic conscience. Consequently, after a few seasons of indifferent opera mounted by an impresario named Lago, the enterprising Augustus Harris was able to secure a very large subscription to reopen in 1888 with a company he had formed at Drury Lane during the previous season, and by keeping just a little in advance of the public taste, ensured the future of the opera for many years.

Harris was knighted in 1891, not, mark you, in recognition of his service to art, but merely because he happened to be Sheriff of London when the Emperor of Germany visited the City! However, he more than justified the honour when in the following year he was responsible for the first *entire* production in England of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, under the baton of Gustav Mahler.

Sir Augustus Harris died at Folkestone on June 22nd, 1896, and the Grand Opera Syndicate became the lessees of Covent Garden, maintaining admirably the fine tradition that had been established.

#### HER MAJESTY'S

Fire, that traditional destroyer of London's theatres, consumed Her Majesty's Theatre on Friday, December 6th, 1867, and the company was obliged to move to Drury Lane. By the end of 1869 a new theatre had been built at a cost of fifty thousand pounds, but as the majority of the stalls and boxes were leased, no tenant seemed willing to be deprived of his personal fortune for the doubtful pleasure of running the new house. In 1874 Her Majesty's was put up for auction, but there was still no offer for it, so in the following year it was taken over for the revivalist mission of Messrs. Moody and Sankey!

J. H. Mapleson came to the rescue of the theatre in 1877 by

opening it as an opera house in April of that year, with Tietjens in *Norma*, under the conductorship of Costa.

Bizet's famous opera *Carmen* was first heard here on June 22nd, 1878, and in 1882 a part of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* was produced for the first time in this country. Mapleson's last Italian season was given in 1887 when Lilli Lehmann was heard in *Fidelio* and Patti in *La Traviata*. Sarah Bernhardt played here three years later.

Her Majesty's was pulled down in 1891. Five years later Beerbohm Tree built another theatre of the same name on part of the site of the old house, at a cost of seventy thousand pounds, opening it on April 28th, 1897, with *The Seats of the Mighty*. Its name was changed to His Majesty's on the accession of King Edward VII in 1901, and because of Tree's fine productions there, it is still regarded by the older playgoers as his memorial theatre.

#### MARIE WILTON AND THE PRINCE OF WALES'S THEATRE

Miss Marie Wilton took over the disreputable old Queen's Theatre in a fit of exuberant optimism early in 1865, but her enthusiasm was a trifle damped the first night she attended a show there. H. B. Baker quotes her own words in his book *The London Stage*:

"Some of the occupants of the stalls (the price was, I think, a shilling) were engaged between the acts in devouring oranges (their faces being buried in them), and drinking ginger beer. Babies were being rocked or smacked to be quiet, which proceeding in many cases had an opposite effect.

A woman looked up to our box, and seeing us staring aghast with, I suppose, an expression of horror . . . first of all 'took a sight' at us, and then shouted 'Now then, you stuck up ones, come out of that, or I'll send this 'ere orange at your 'eads.'

Mr. Byron (H. J. Byron) went to the back of the box and laughed until we thought he would be ill. He said my face was a study. 'Oh, Byron,' I said, 'do you think the people from the West End will ever come into those seats?' 'No,' he replied, 'not those seats. . . .'

One woman in the stalls called out: 'I say, Mrs. Grove, 'ere's one for you,' at the same moment throwing a big orange; upon which Mr. Byron remarked, 'Nice woman, Mrs. Grove . . . orange grove.' I think, if I could, I would at that moment have retired from my bargain, but the deed was done, and there was no going back from it."

Marie Wilton [1839-1921] was the eldest of six daughters of a provincial actor. Doncaster is believed to have been her birth-place. As a child actress she won the praise of Charles Macready and Charles Kemble, but it was Charles Dillon, manager of the Lyceum who first brought her to London. She drew high praise from Charles Dickens when he saw her play the part of Pippo in H. J. Byron's *The Maid and the Magpie*.

To start her new venture at The Queen's (which she renamed, with royal permission, The Prince of Wales's Theatre) she borrowed a thousand pounds from her brother, Francis Drake. The greater part of this sum went in cleaning and partly re-seating the house. She opened on April 15th, 1865, with only a hundred and fifty pounds in the bank, a theatre prettily decorated to her own specifications, and H. J. Byron as a partner.

The small company Miss Wilton assembled included Squire Bancroft [1841-1926] with whom she had played at Liverpool. A native of Rotherhithe, he had been educated at private schools in this country and in France, and had up to that time been playing entirely in provincial stock companies.

Bancroft made his London débüt on the opening night in a little comedy by J. P. Wooler called *A Winning Hazard*. Miss Wilton's speculation was a success: she concentrated first upon burlesques, but in the following June produced a new comedy by H. J. Byron, entitled *War to the Knife*. Her first outstanding production was T. W. Robertson's comedy *Society*, which every other manager in London had rejected. When it started its run on November 11th, 1865, everybody realized that a new revival in dramatic art had begun. Robertson's second comedy *Ours* made another hit in September, 1866.

In the following year Bancroft succeeded Byron as joint manager of the Prince of Wales's, and married Miss Wilton. Together they possessed practically all the qualities required for good theatrical management. They enjoyed, too, the loyal adherence of T. W. Robertson, who then wrote several more plays that did much to establish the Bancroft management: *Caste* [1867], *Play* [1868], *School* [1869] and *M.P.* [1870]. In these, Mrs. Bancroft's piquant humour and brilliant technique were the talk of the town, and her husband's Captain Hawtree in *Caste* was the best drawing "swell" the playgoers had seen for years.

Other productions by the Bancrofts while they were at this house included *The School for Scandal*, Bulwer-Lytton's *Money*, and Boucicault's *London Assurance*. But the Prince of Wales's Theatre

soon proved to be too small for such progressive managers, and in 1879 they took The Haymarket.

Edgar Bruce was the next manager, and his greatest success was F. C. Burnand's comedy *The Colonel* in 1881. It ran for a year, then he took it around the provinces, making a handsome fortune for himself, out of which he built The Prince's Theatre in 1884. The Prince of Wales's then became a Salvation Army Hall, and its name was adopted by Bruce for his new theatre.

#### BUCKSTONE AND THE BANCROFTS AT THE HAYMARKET

J. B. Buckstone took the Haymarket when Webster went to the Adelphi in 1853, and collected an excellent comedy company for it. He wrote about a hundred and fifty plays himself—some of them popular at the time, but inconsequential to us—and enjoyed a great reputation as a low comedian.

He always gave good value for money: it was generally one o'clock in the morning before the Haymarket closed. His programmes usually concluded with a short farce that started at midnight, and for several years the livelier opera patrons would go across to the smaller house after leaving Her Majesty's to join in the fun. In those days, most people lived within reasonable walking distance of the theatres, and there was no scramble for the public conveyances.

For all that, Buckstone's finances grew steadily worse, and in 1861, almost in despair, he engaged Edward Sothern to play the part of Lord Dundreary in Tom Taylor's play *Our American Cousin*. The staggering reception given to this mediocre effusion is evidence of the intelligence of the average playgoer at that time: incidentally, this was the first of the "long runs" to which we have now become accustomed. Its great popularity is perhaps explained by H. B. Baker's observations in *The London Stage*:

"Sothern's success in America was one of those extraordinary instances in which greatness is thrust upon a man against his will. As the piece was originally written, Asa Trenchard, created by Jefferson, was the principal character; and Sothern, at that time the light comedian at Laura Keene's theatre, was so disgusted with the part of the silly lord that only the threat of dismissal induced him to play it. Thus coerced, he resolved in revenge to turn it into ridicule, and make it perfectly unendurable to the audience. He gagged, he hopped, he lisped, fully expecting to evoke a storm of disapprobation. To his

astonishment, the audience laughed and applauded, and professional instinct told him that he had made a hit instead of a fiasco. Night after night he added some new gags, some new absurdity, until the once despised part over-shadowed every other, and was *the thing of the comedy.*"

Sothern assisted Buckstone for some time in the management of the Haymarket, and his popularity in the more stupid circles of high society no doubt helped to stave off the management's creditors.

The Haymarket was entirely reconstructed in 1879 and reopened by the Bancrofts on January 31st, 1880, with Bulwer-Lytton's play *Money*. It was then the most splendid and luxurious theatre in London, but in his zeal to make it a playhouse *de luxe*, Bancroft had abolished the pit—one of the most ancient institutions in the English theatre—and the disapproval of the audience was unmistakably indicated by the disturbances which took place on the opening night.

Many of the plays that had been successful in the old Prince of Wales's Theatre were transferred here, but in their spacious new setting they failed to draw the audiences anticipated by the Bancrofts. However, when the able manager and his wife retired in 1885; they were given a great ovation.

Herbert Beerbohm Tree became the lessee in 1887 and for ten years produced and personally played in a succession of splendid plays, including works of Shakespeare, Ibsen, Wilde and Maeterlinck.

#### THE OLYMPIC AND THE LYCEUM

For a few years during the eighteen fifties the old Olympic was one of the most fashionable theatres in London. Frederick Robson was all the rage there in a silly farce called *The Wandering Minstrel* by H. Mayhew, and great crowds went to see the burlesques and domestic dramas that were then in vogue. Tom Taylor's *Ticket-of-Leave Man* had an extraordinarily long run, and was repeatedly revived at the same house until the late eighties, when the Olympic ceased to be of any importance in the world of drama.

Charles Dillon was the manager at the Lyceum in 1856, and delighted his patrons as D'Artagnan in *The Three Musketeers*. He was a great favourite in the sixties, "an actor of great emotional gifts, but very deficient in intellectual ones," said Westland Marston. He had risen from the very lowest ranks of the profession, and made no attempt to conceal his pathetic lack of



III GILBERT AND SULLIVAN: Reproduced from the original design by Charles Ricketts, A.R.A. for a lady of the chorus in the most famous of the Savoy Operas, *The Mikado*



education. Still, he knew good acting when he saw it, and must be given the credit for having introduced Miss Marie Wilton to the London stage, for she played with him in Charles Webb's *Belphegor*, in 1856.

Charles Fechter, who took over the Lyceum in 1863, was one of the few who were responsible for the initiation of the revival of the theatre. He revolutionized scenic art and the mechanics used in the theatre, improved the lighting, and attended fastidiously to details of costume. In 1865 he invited Henry Irving to join the Lyceum company, but the offer was declined.

#### HENRY IRVING AT THE LYCEUM

Henry Irving, whose original name was John Henry Brodribb, was born at Keinton Mandeville, Somerset, on February 6th, 1838, son of a poor and narrow-minded shopkeeper. He was educated at Dr. Pinches' City Commercial School in George Yard, Lombard Street; became a solicitor's office boy and then a junior clerk with a firm of East India merchants. He joined an elocution class and spent most of his time and money in seeing Samuel Phelps at Sadler's Wells. When he was sixteen he made the acquaintance of a member of the Sadler's Wells company, William Hoskins, who helped him in his desire to learn the art of acting. When he was eighteen, Hoskins introduced him to E. D. Davies, manager of the Lyceum Theatre, Sunderland, who engaged him. His first appearance was made on this northern stage as Henry Irving on September 18th, 1856, in the part of Gaston, Duke of Orleans, in Lytton's *Rochefeu*. He received no salary for the first month, but twenty-five shillings thereafter, out of which he sent money home to help support his parents. In 1857 he went to Edinburgh, played there two and a half years, and then came to London to play a small part in Oxenford's *Ivy Hall* on September 24th, 1859, at The Princess's Theatre. Disliking the insignificant part assigned to him, he asked to be relieved of his contract.

He played in Dublin for a few weeks in March, 1860, and then proceeded by way of Glasgow and Greenock to Manchester, where he stayed enjoying the esteem of the Lancashire people for nearly five years. It was at the Theatre Royal in that city that he first appeared as Hamlet.

After a tour of Edinburgh, Bury, Oxford, Birmingham and Liverpool, he returned to London in October, 1866, to play at the St. James's Theatre, having successfully appeared at The Prince's, Manchester, in Boucicault's *Two Lives of Mary Leigh*. He was

then only twenty-eight, yet he had played nearly six hundred parts in the provinces. In the following February he went to Paris to play in *Our American Cousin* at the Théâtre des Italiens. Returning to England, he played at the St. James's again, the new Queen's Theatre, the Haymarket and Drury Lane, until he went to the Vaudeville in April, 1870 and scored his first real success in London as Digby Grant in Albery's *Two Roses*.

In 1871, H. L. Bateman, an American, took the Lyceum and succeeded in getting Irving to join the company, which included Bateman's two daughters, Kate and Isabel. After a few months of financially unsuccessful plays, Irving persuaded Bateman to put on *The Bells*, a dramatic version of Erckmann-Chatrian's *Le Juif Polonais*. It ran for six months with Irving playing the part of the conscience-haunted burgomaster, and did much to establish the reputation of this great actor.

Irving's next triumph was in the title-rôle of W. G. Wills's *Charles I*. The pathos and dignity of his portrayal of the King was a favourite topic in theatrical circles for years afterwards. *Eugene Aram*, another play by Wills, followed in 1873, with another superb interpretation of the title-rôle by Irving, and then the great actor appeared as the Cardinal in Lytton's *Richelieu*. His Hamlet [1874] took him to the very apex of his fame—Tennyson preferred his portrayal to that of Macready. The play ran for two hundred nights. His Othello and Macbeth were not so satisfactory, and he provoked some sharp criticism.

His finest effort in Shakespeare was in *Richard III*, which was revived in 1877, but some of the critics considered that his conception of the character, though scholarly, lacked the vitality of Garrick and Kean.

Bateman died in 1875, and for a while the Lyceum was managed by his widow, but in 1878 Irving became the sole lessee. He was then just over forty. Various alterations and improvements were made to the house, and he reopened it on December 30th with *Hamlet*: a memorable evening, with Miss Ellen Terry making her first appearance at this theatre as Ophelia.

Thus, this famous theatre entered upon the most glorious period of its history. For years, great drama really thrived there: Irving presented superb productions of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Macbeth*, and a most lovely mounting of Tennyson's tragedy *The Cup*, to mention only a few.

In May, 1885, there was a disturbance in the house when he

started to permit the booking of seats in the pit and gallery, hitherto unreserved. Wisely, he abandoned the new practice.

The following December saw one of the greatest triumphs of his career: the production of Goethe's masterpiece *Faust* (adapted by Wills), in which his Mephistopheles was one of his most vivid and striking impersonations. An inspiration, too, was Ellen Terry's Marguerite. The theatre was literally besieged: people started to queue for the unreserved seats soon after dawn, and it is said that thousands came from Germany to see this remarkable presentation.

The most splendid and elaborate production of Irving's career was his *Henry VIII* with music by Edward German, in January, 1892. Although it ran for over six months, the heavy cost of production—considerably over eleven thousand pounds—swallowed all the profits.

Later in the same year Irving reconsidered Tennyson's *Becket*, which he had refused in 1879. He obtained the great poet's approval for several cuts in the text, and persuaded him to write a new speech for Becket for the end of Act I scene iii. Four months after Tennyson's death—February 6th, 1893, to be exact—this tragedy was received with great enthusiasm, and a Command Performance was given before the Queen at Windsor. It ran for five months, and was frequently revived. Moreover, it proved to be Irving's most popular play when he made his fourth tour of America in the autumn of that year. His receipts during the six months he was in the United States amounted to over a hundred and twenty-three thousand pounds.

Nevertheless, towards the close of the century his good fortune wavered. The year 1897 showed a financial loss, and 1898 was even worse. *Peter the Great*, a tragedy by Irving's son Laurence, and *The Medicine Man*, by H. D. Traill and Robert Hitchens were both utter failures, and then a fire destroyed nine-tenths of his huge and costly stock of scenery.

The autumn of 1898 found him dangerously ill with pleurisy at Glasgow, and by the following February his finances were in such a precarious state that he was obliged to put his extensive library up for auction. In the same year, 1899, his interest in the Lyceum was transferred to a company.

Returning to the stage after his illness, he produced his son's translation of *Robespierre*, which Victorien Sardou [1831-1908] had written expressly for him. This was one of the plays he took on his sixth American tour which lasted from October, 1899, to May, 1900.

## THE ADELPHI REBUILT

In 1858 the old Adelphi was completely rebuilt: an attractive and commodious theatre arising from the dust of the old playhouse. Its first great hit was the domestic drama by Dion Boucicault called *The Colleen Bawn*, based on the novel *The Collegians*. It commenced on September 10th, 1860, and was the first drama on the English stage in which mechanical effects outshone the acting. The cavern scene caught the imagination of the childish public at that time, and for the best part of a year the house was packed every night. The author raked in money hand over fist, but the inventor of the effects that so intrigued the people—an old stage carpenter—received next to nothing.

Another "sensational" drama by the same author, *The Octoroon*, followed in November, 1861, and four years later his *Rip Van Winkle* (based on Washington Irving's story) with Joseph Jefferson in the title-rôle, had a six months' run. Jefferson's great artistry in his interpretation of the vagabond hero surpassed anything else the Adelphi could offer in the 'sixties. In fact, there is little more of interest to record in the history of this house during the remainder of the nineteenth century, except perhaps a fine production of *Monte Cristo*, adapted from the romance by Dumas, in 1868; and remarkably long runs of such plays as *In the Ranks* by Sims and Pettitt [1883]; and F. C. Burnand's *Proof* [1878].

## MARIE WILTON AT THE STRAND

The little playhouse did not emerge from the gloom of public apathy and financial instability until W. H. Swanborough took it over in 1858, and had the good fortune to enlist the help of Marie Wilton and H. J. Byron. It was while she was at this house, by the way, that Miss Wilton made so favourable an impression upon Charles Dickens. In a letter to a friend he wrote:

"I really wish you would go between this and next Thursday to see *The Maid and the Magpie* burlesque. There is the strangest thing in it that ever I have seen on the stage—the boy Pippo, by Miss Wilton. While it is astonishingly impudent (must be, or it couldn't be done at all), it is so stupendously like a boy, and unlike a woman, that it is perfectly free from offence. I never have seen such a thing. She does an imitation of the dancing Christy Minstrels—wonderfully clever—which, in the audacity of its thorough-going, is surprising. A thing that you cannot imagine a woman doing at all; and yet the manner, the appear-

ance, the levity, impulse, and spirit of it are so exactly like a boy that you cannot think of anything like her sex in association with it. It begins at eight, and is over by quarter-past nine. . . . I call her the cleverest girl I have ever seen on the stage in my time, and the most singularly original."

The eminent American actor, J. S. Clarke, played his famous part Major de Boots here in 1868, and afterwards became one of the theatre's most regular visitors. Edward Terry [1844-1912] was the leading comedian at this theatre from 1869-75.

The Strand Theatre<sup>1</sup> was reconstructed and enlarged in 1882, and reopened with *The Comedy of Errors* : an elaborate production, but financially unsuccessful. From that time its existence was precarious. For several years it was on the verge of disaster, in fact a bonus was offered to any manager who could run it rent free to save it from the ravages of mildew and moth. One of its few successes was a run of over a thousand performances of *A Chinese Honeymoon* [1901], a musical play by George Dance (music by Howard Talbot) which, according to H. G. Hibbert, a leading critic of that time, was "an ingenious attempt to get the glamour of *Aladdin* in musical comedy."

#### CHARLEY'S AUNT AT THE ROYALTY

Miss Kelly's little theatre was completely reconstructed in 1861 and reopened on November 12th by Mrs. Charles Selby, with a play called *Atar Gull*, but the theatre appears to have been more of a school for young players than a public playhouse. Adelaide Neilson made her débüt there as Juliet in 1865. From 1870 to 1883 it was in the hands of Miss Henrietta Hodson, who became noted for her ambitious productions. A noteworthy date during her reign is March 25th, 1875, when *Trial by Jury*, the first of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas, was produced at the Royalty. Then this tiny house was reconstructed again, enlarged and tastefully decorated by Miss Kate Santley. During the 'eighties it acquired a reputation for French drama.

In December, 1892, that amusing farcical comedy by Brandon Thomas, *Charley's Aunt*, took London by storm. It was backed by a city man named Hartmont, and it is said that during the rehearsals he lost confidence in it and began to moan about his rashness in putting money into such a show. The manager, who was certain of its success, offered to buy Hartmont's share (a thousand pounds), but the shrewd city man detected the eagerness with

<sup>1</sup> The existing Strand Theatre began its life as the Waldorf in May, 1905.

which the offer was made, and declined it. Eventually, he made over sixty thousand pounds on his original investment!—and remember, there was no ten-shillings-in-the-pound income tax to take the gilt off in those days.

It seems that by this time the Royalty had again become somewhat dilapidated, for H. G. Hibbert records in his *Playgoer's Memories* that when the old Duke of Cambridge went to see *Charley's Aunt* he sat down heavily in his stall, which collapsed forthwith and deposited him on the floor. Hibbert says “Characteristically, he swore like a trooper, then burst into hearty laughter.”

### THE ST. JAMES'S AND THE KENDALS

Augustus Braham, son of the founder of this house, took charge in 1859, and opened with *Raymond and Agnes*, a melodramatic ballet by Charles Farley, adapted from M. G. Lewis's work *The Monk*. It played for five nights to yawning rows of empty seats, and then Braham retired hastily.

After that there was a dismal succession of managers, of whom little need be recorded, though it is interesting to note that Richard Mansell, who was there in the 'seventies, got into serious trouble with the Lord Chamberlain when he produced *Vert-Vert*, an opera-bouffe. The scanty attire of several of the girls in it and a thoroughly indecent dance cost him his licence. He then roundly abused the Lord Chamberlain, who promptly added a note to his records to prevent the removal of the ban on Mansell in later years. The Royalty continued to ruin its lessees until the Kendals, with John Hare as a partner, took over in 1879.

William Hunter Kendal [1843-1917], a Londoner whose surname was originally Grimston, first appeared at the Royalty in 1861. He played in Birmingham and Glasgow for some time, and was then engaged by Buckstone at The Haymarket. In 1869 he married Margaret (Madge) Robertson, sister of T. W. Robertson the dramatist, and after engagements at the Opera Comique and the Gaiety, he entered into a “silent” partnership with John Hare at the Court Theatre [1875]. One of his greatest triumphs was as Dr. Thornton in *Peril* at the Prince of Wales's Theatre.

His wife was one of the finest all-round actresses of the day, and between them they were responsible for many notable productions at the St. James's. To them must be given the credit for having produced Sir Arthur Pinero's first notable play *The*

*Money Spinner* in 1881. They relinquished the St. James's in 1888 when the lease expired.

### THE CAN-CAN AT THE PRINCESS'S THEATRE

It should be recorded that Charles Kean (son of Edmund Kean) made his farewell here in 1866, though his final appearance on the stage was made in Liverpool during the following year. After a long and painful illness he died at Queensborough Terrace, Chelsea, on January 22nd, 1868, and was buried at Catherington, Hants.

It was at the Princess's Theatre that the notorious *can-can* dance made its first appearance in London in connection with a melodrama called *The Huguenot Captain*. It ran for several months and made the *can-can* the rage of London. H. G. Hibbert in his *Playgoer's Memories* says of this dance :

"Its most remarkable exponents were Finette, Colonna, . . . and the 'celebrated' Esther Austin. The Payne family, one of whom became the famous clown, also danced the *can-can*, which was destined to lose the Alhambra its licence . . . though it was allowed its fling elsewhere, and patronized by Royalty."

*Drink*, Charles Reade's adaptation of *L'Assommoir*, with Charles Warner as Coupeau, made a small fortune for Walter Gooch, who was running the Princess's in 1879.

Fire destroyed the theatre in 1880, and when it was rebuilt, it opened with a string of failures. Then Wilson Barrett ran it from 1881-86, scoring a great hit with *The Lights o' London* (George R. Sims). It ran for two hundred and twenty-eight performances, and then travelled all round the world.

When Barrett was negotiating with Sims for this play, the author was only a clerk in the city, and would gladly have sold it outright for a couple of hundred pounds. However, Barrett insisted on paying by results, and almost overnight, as it were, Sims found himself with an income of fourteen thousand pounds a year. For all that, *The Lights o' London* was not a brilliant play, but its vivid character studies caught the public in a sympathetic mood and filled the house night after night.

### THE 'OLD VIC'

The Victoria closed on September 9th, 1871, but after some seven or eight years its lease was acquired by Emma Cons, a social reformer, and it was re-opened as the Royal Victoria Coffee Hall on Boxing Day, 1880, to provide "refined entertainment without

drink"! Ballad concerts and operatic excerpts made up most of the programmes, and although some sort of a chorus was employed in 1895 and various operatic productions were given in the following year, the theatre did not regain its status until 1914.

### THE HOLBORN AND THE QUEEN'S

Having dealt with the more historic houses, let us review briefly a few of the many theatres erected during the second half of the nineteenth century. The first to be built after the theatrical "slump" in the middle of the century was the Holborn, erected in 1866 by Sefton Parry. It was renamed the Mirror in 1875, when Horace Wigan took it over, and later still became known as the Duke's Theatre. It was burnt down in 1880.

The greatest success here was *New Babylon*, a play by Paul Meritt and G. F. Rowe. Its advertisements described this extravagant inanity as :

"The most attractive drama ever written. Suits all classes. The Collision on the Atlantic. Tattersalls with its sales of horses. Cremorne, with its dancing platform and Ten Thousand Lights. Goodwood on Grand Race Day. The Thames Embankment with its electric Witness, and Seven Dials by night are pictures that must attract."

Because of the appearance on its boards of several famous actors during its short life, I must mention the Queen's Theatre, which existed from 1867-1878.<sup>1</sup> It was also known as The National Theatre for some time. One of the largest houses in London, it had an extensive, well-equipped stage which enabled spectacular productions to be staged lavishly. After its last failure in 1878, it became some sort of a co-operative store.

### THE GAIETY AND ITS QUARTET

This theatre was originally the Strand Music Hall, but it was reconstructed in 1868 and reopened as a playhouse under the management of John Hollingshead. Almost every great player of the day appeared on its boards at some time.

It is interesting to note that a burlesque produced here in 1871 bore the names of W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan. One cannot help wondering how many people at that time realised what those two names would become in the annals of the English theatre within twenty years! Incidentally, another of Gilbert's earliest

<sup>1</sup> The twentieth-century Queen's Theatre was opened in 1907.



80. The final scene of John Gielgud's production of *Hamlet* at the New Theatre in 1934  
Setting and costumes by "Motley"



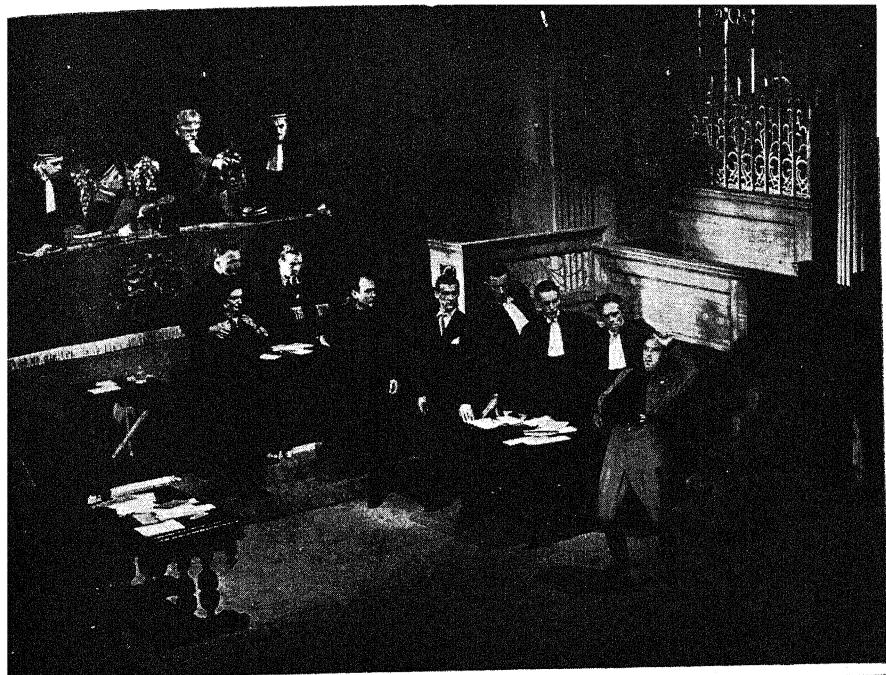
81. SIR LAURENCE OLIVIER



82. FLORA ROBSON, C.B.E.



83. A scene from the Old Vic production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1937, with RALPH RICHARDSON, VIVIEN LEIGH, ROBERT HELPMANN and GORDON



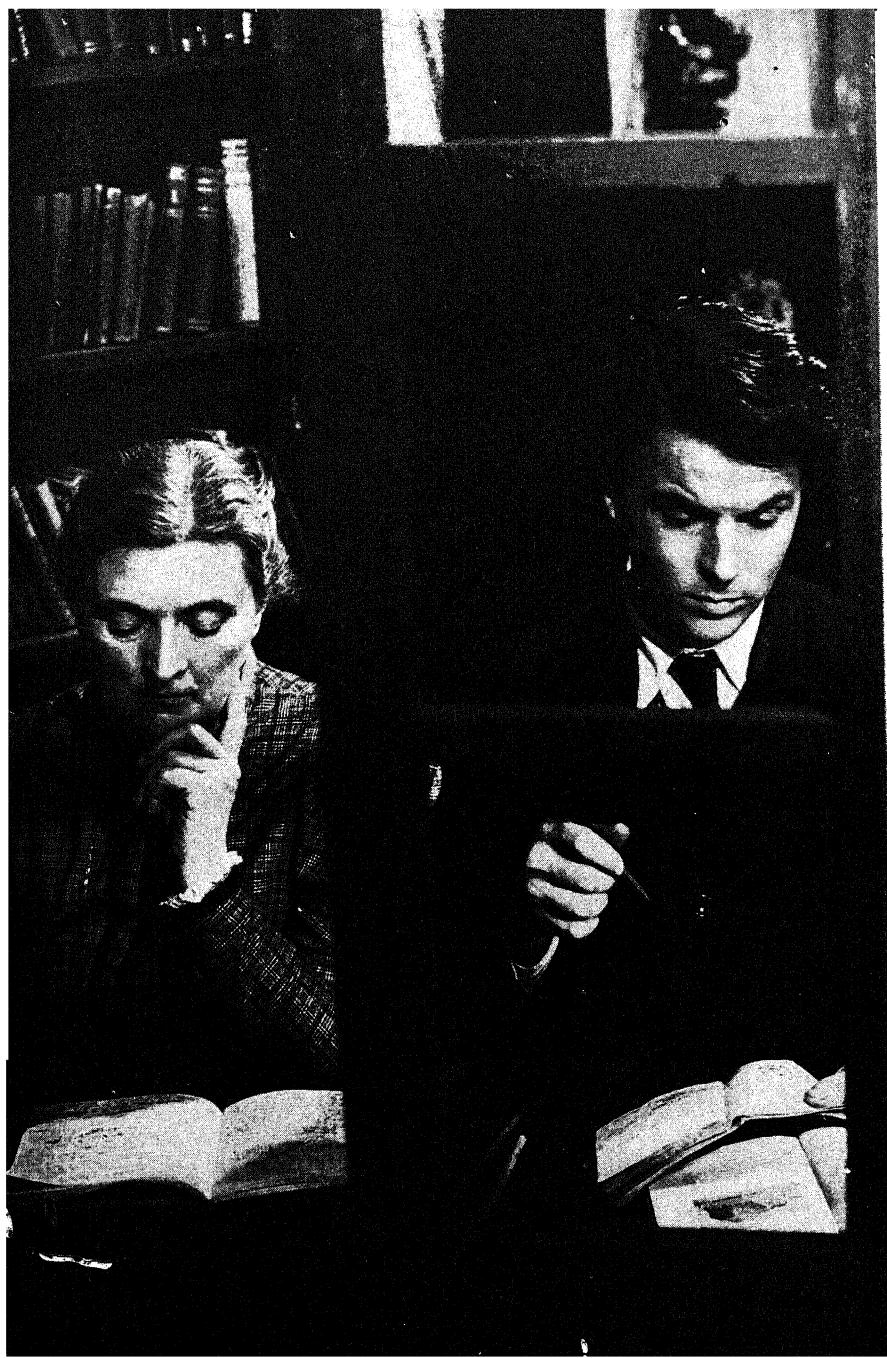
84. (Top) A scene from Murray Macdonald's production of *Judgment Day* (Elmer Rice) at the Strand Theatre, 1937

85. (Bottom) WALTER HUDD as Battler, ALEXANDER KNOX as the Judge and CECIL TROUNCER as Bombardone in Bernard Shaw's *Geneva*, at the Saville, 1937

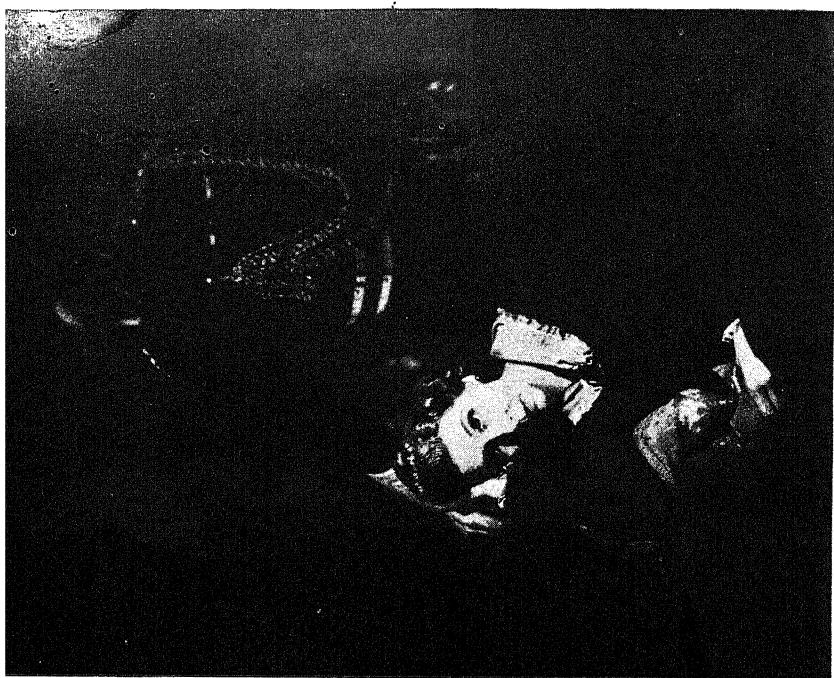




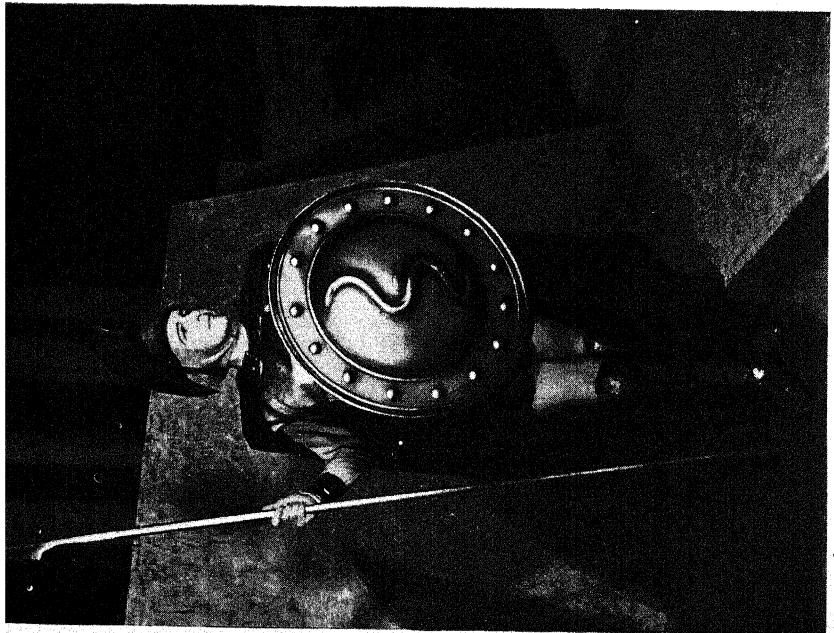
86. ALEC GUINNESS<sup>24</sup>; Hamlet in Tyrone Guthrie's modern dress production at the Old Vic in 1938



87. SYBIL THORNDIKE played the schoolmistress and EMYL WILLIAMS the young Welsh miner in his play *The Corn is Green* (Duchess, 1938)



89. LOUISE HAMPTON as the Mother and RAYMOND LOVELL as the Father in Karel Čapek's *The Mother*, adapted and produced by Miles Malleson (Garrick, 1939)



88. ALFRED LUNT as Jupiter in the adaptation by the American dramatist S. N. Behrman of Jean Giraudoux' *Amphtryon 38*, at the Lyric Theatre, 1938

so that he could dash off immediately after the show to catch a suburban train at Charing Cross, thereby saving the cost of a cab! His stinginess was the subject of many little stories, which cannot, unfortunately, be recorded here.

Another staggering Vaudeville triumph was H. J. Byron's comedy *Our Boys*, with David James as Perkyn Middlewick, in 1875. Although Byron made a handsome sum out of this play, he foolishly sold the provincial rights to a Mr. William Duck, whose profits on the transaction exceeded the author's royalties by many thousands. Duck, an illiterate creature, met Byron in Plymouth one day and exclaimed, "I've been for a walk round the 'oe." Byron immediately retorted, "Try one round the aitch for a change."

#### THE COURT AND THE OPERA COMIQUE

The Court Theatre in Chelsea began its career as a nonconformist chapel. In the late 'sixties it was converted into the New Chelsea Theatre, but accomplished nothing of importance. Shortly afterwards it was renamed The Belgravia, but continued to be of little consequence until late in 1870, when Miss Marie Litton reconstructed it, personally supervised the decorations, and reopened it in January, 1871, as the Royal Court Theatre, with W. S. Gilbert's comedy *Randall's Thumb*.

In 1873 the Royal Court Theatre became the talk of the town. *The Happy Land*, a mischievous but highly amusing burlesque bristling with political satire, pilloried several leading cabinet ministers of the day, much to the delight of dozens of members of Parliament. Eventually, Mr. Gladstone intervened and the Lord Chamberlain insisted on drastic modifications in the make-up of three of the principals. Lottie Venne played in this as a prospective cabinet minister. After convincing everybody that she couldn't tell the difference between a barge and a battleship, she was solemnly presented with a portfolio marked "First Lord of the Admiralty."

John Hare took over in 1875 and ran the house for five years with a brilliant company, including the Kendals.

The next big success at the Court was in 1885 when Arthur Cecil and John Clayton were running it jointly: Pinero's farcical comedy *The Magistrate* which made all London rock with laughter. Three years later Mrs. John Wood and Arthur Chudleigh became the lessees, opening with *Mamma*, a comedy by Sydney Grundy which reflected none of the qualities associated with the author's surname.

Just near the old Globe another theatre was built in 1871 and became known as The Opera Comique. The Comédie Française played there for a while, and Madame Ristori made a sensational appearance on its boards in 1873.

Several of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas were first performed at this house. *The Sorcerer* [1877], *H.M.S. Pinafore* [1878], *The Pirates of Penzance* [1880], and *Patience* [1881]. After a very satisfactory run of F. C. Grove's *As in a Looking-Glass* in 1887, the Opera Comique declined rapidly.

### THE ALHAMBRA AND THE CRITERION

The original Alhambra was built in 1854 as The Panopticon of Science and Art. In 1858 E. T. Smith leased it as an athletic and musical entertainment hall, calling it The Alhambra because of the Moorish style of its architecture. Shortly afterwards a proper stage was installed, and many beautiful ballets were to be seen there. At that time it was notorious as a rendezvous for young people bent on promiscuity.

During the Franco-German War [1870-71] it acquired a new reputation when its vast numbers of French and German patrons would gather every night in its promenade and indulge in glorious free fights. Apparently everybody enjoyed them immensely. Alas! this and the *Can-can* brought the wrath of officialdom down upon the manager's head, and he lost his licence.

Not long afterwards, the Alhambra Company was formed, and John Baum obtained a theatrical licence for it. Comic operas and exquisite ballets were the chief attraction here for years, and the house was noted for its large and splendid orchestra. One of its best productions was Offenbach's *Le Roi Carotte*. Its old music hall licence was regained in 1884.

The Criterion in Piccadilly Circus was built in 1874 by Spiers and Pond as an appendage to their restaurant, and was something of a novelty because being underground air had to be pumped in to prevent the suffocation of the audience. Old ladies were often very nervous about patronising it, and frequently badgered the attendants asking them if they were *quite sure* that the fans were in proper working order. H. J. Byron, the first manager, opened it with his new comedy *An American Lady*, but its finances were very precarious until Alexander Henderson took it over in 1877 and specialized in adaptations of French comedies. A mild scandal was caused in March of that year when Albery's *Pink Dominoes* gave the respectable suburban matrons something to think about

in the shape of a foretaste of the naughty nineties. Charles Wyndham, who was a popular light comedian in this theatre for several years, soon succeeded Henderson as manager, and made it his London stage until 1899, when he built Wyndham's Theatre.

In 1883 the Board of Works began being difficult, so the Criterion was reconstructed and considerably enlarged. Luxuriously appointed, and equipped with electric lighting, it reopened in April, 1884.

### GILBERT AND SULLIVAN AT THE SAVOY

From its foundation in 1881 the Savoy was for years famous for its productions of Gilbert and Sullivan. *Patience* was chosen for the opening night, and then *Iolanthe* was given its first performance here in 1882, *Princess Ida* in 1884, the tremendously popular *Mikado* in 1885, *Ruddigore* in 1887, *The Yeomen of the Guard* in 1888, *The Gondoliers* in 1889; and after the unfortunate dispute between the famous collaborators, *Utopia Limited* in 1893 and *The Grand Duke* in 1896.

By the way, their famous quarrel is said to have arisen over the question of a new carpet for the Savoy during the run of *The Gondoliers* in 1890. I need scarcely enlarge upon the amazingly widespread popularity of these light operas, and even if for the present they are heard less frequently than in the past, I think it not at all unlikely that they will be revived and readily appreciated when the nation settles down to more normal conditions.

### THE COMEDY, AVENUE AND THE PRINCE'S

The Comedy Theatre we know to-day in Panton Street, Haymarket, was built in 1881 for the surprisingly small sum of twenty thousand pounds, and opened with an English version of *La Mascotte*. For several years it was devoted to comic opera, Fred Leslie making a wonderful hit in *Rip Van Winkle*, by H. B. Farnie, with Planquette's music, and W. S. Penley outshining everybody else as Brother Pelican in *Falka* (Farnie, from the French, with music by Chassaigne).

Sir Charles Hawtrey was the lessee from 1887-1893, and again from 1896-1898. It was here in 1894 that J. M. Barrie had one of his earliest successes: *The Professor's Love Story*. (The first of Barrie's plays to be produced in London was *Walker, London*, at Toole's in 1892.)

Sefton Parry built the Avenue Theatre in 1882 in the hope that the old South Eastern Railway would buy it from him at a fancy

price when they embarked upon their improvement scheme in connection with Charing Cross Station. They didn't; and it afterwards became The Playhouse. At this time there was a great deal of ugly talk about speculation in property, so Parry published a curious Apology for building another theatre, drawing attention to the need for new playhouses.

One of The Avenue's most notable successes was Offenbach's *La Vie Parisienne* in 1883.

I have already mentioned that Edgar Bruce built The Prince's, one of the most pleasant houses in London at the time, in 1884, and renamed it The Prince of Wales's when the little Tottenham Street theatre of that name closed down. He opened with W. S. Gilbert's *Palace of Truth*, but his first real success was with *Called Back* (Hugh Conway and J. Comyns Carr), in May of the same year.

Some of the long runs here in the 'eighties and 'nineties were *Paul Jones* [1889], *Marjorie* [1890], *L'Enfant Prodigue* [1891], *In Town* [1892], *A Gaiety Girl* [1893], *Gentleman Joe* [1895] and *La Poupee* [1897].

#### THE EMPIRE, TERRY'S AND THE SHAFESBURY

The Empire was erected in Leicester Square on the site of Saville House and what used to be the London residence of the Earl of Leicester, and opened in 1884 with the comic opera *Chilperic* (R. Reece, F. A. Marshall and R. Mansell; with music by Hervé), said to have been the most spectacular show Londoners had ever seen up to that time. Financially, it was a failure, and in three years the Empire became a music hall. The programmes in those days generally consisted of a couple of magnificent ballets supported by a splendid variety show, to which must be added the attraction of its world-famous promenade. In the naughty 'nineties this promenade shared with that of the Alhambra a reputation of being a smart hunting ground for rakes in search of young ladies of easy virtue. It was also frequented in those days by gentlemen who indulged in what were politely called "unnatural love-affairs." Needless to say, it has been a highly respectable theatre since the beginning of the present century. At one time the Empire was paying a dividend of nearly sixty per cent., yet there were many lean years in its history. Early in the nineteen-twenties it became a cinema.

As I am not mentioning *all* the theatres of this period, there is little to justify a reference to Terry's, except that Edward Terry built it on the site of the famous old Occidental Tavern in the

Strand, in 1887. Terry had a passion for church and social work, and appropriately, he opened it with a play of his own, called *The Churchwarden*. This theatre was not very prosperous, and it might have got into difficulties had not Sir Arthur Pinero come to the rescue with *Sweet Lavender*, which enjoyed a run of no less than six hundred and seventy performances.

According to H. G. Hibbert in his *Playgoer's Memories*, the Shaftesbury Theatre, built in Shaftesbury Avenue in 1888, was "run up for twenty thousand pounds by a Lancashire merchant, John Lancaster, for the exploitation of his wife, Miss Ellen Wallis, as a Shakespearean actress." Hibbert continues: ". . . on the first night the iron curtain refused to go up on *As You Like It*, and the audience sadly dispersed through the dank passages."

It was at the Shaftesbury that the famous American musical play *The Belle of New York* first delighted the London playgoers in 1898. It ran for six hundred and ninety-seven performances, making a small profit of a hundred thousand pounds. The late George Musgrove, the manager responsible for bringing the American company over here, found some difficulty in making them see eye to eye with him on the question of remuneration. He offered Dan Daly, the principal, fifty pounds a week with an air of magnanimous generosity. Daly merely stared and replied bluntly "Go to hell." So Musgrove had to think again.

### THE GARRICK AND THE PALACE

The Garrick in Charing Cross Road was built for Sir John Hare by W. S. Gilbert. He opened it on April 24th, 1889, with *The Profligate* (Pinero), in which he played the part of Lord Dangars. Hare stayed there until 1895, when he first visited America, and was responsible for the original production of many plays, including *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbesmith* (Pinero) and *A Pair of Spectacles* (Sydney Grundy).

Notable long runs here in the 'nineties were *Dream Faces* [1890], *A Fool's Paradise* [1892], *Diplomacy* [1893], and *The Gay Lord Quex* [1899].

The Palace we know so well to-day in Cambridge Circus was opened by Richard D'Oyly Carte on January 31st, 1891, as The Royal English Opera House, with Sir Arthur Sullivan's *Ivanhoe*, (libretto by Julian Sturgess, based on Scott's famous novel). D'Oyly Carte's idea was to establish the Royal English Opera House as the permanent home of grand English opera, but although *Ivanhoe* was superbly mounted and had the advantage of the best

singers and a splendid orchestra, it was a failure financially, despite the fact that it ran for six months.

Disappointed, but determined to persevere, he put on an English version of Messager's *La Basoche* in the following November, but after a couple of months it failed. Sarah Bernhardt played in Moreau's *Cleopatra* there during the summer months of 1892, but by that time D'Oyly Carte had become convinced that it would be impossible to run the theatre as an opera house, and towards the end of that year he sold it to Sir Augustus Harris's syndicate, who reopened it on December 10th as The Palace of Varieties.

#### THE LYRIC, DALY'S AND OTHERS

The Lyric Theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue was opened in December, 1888, by H. J. Leslie with *Dorothy*. It was a particularly successful house from the start, for after two long runs in 1889 (*Doris* and *The Red Hussar*), each of the following ran for many months during the next decade. *La Cigale* [1890], *The Mountebanks* [1892], *Incognita* [1892], *Little Christopher Columbus* [1893], *His Excellency* [1894], *The Sign of the Cross* [1896], *Dandy Dan the Lifeguardsman* [1897], *Little Miss Nobody* [1898], *El Capitan* [1899] and *Florodora* [1899].

A brief mention should be made of Daly's because of one or two notable productions in it during the 'nineties. It was opened in 1893 by Augustin Daly with *The Taming of the Shrew*, but its reputation was established chiefly by musical comedy. A musical show called *An Artist's Model* was given four hundred and five performances in 1895, and in the following year the first production of the popular Japanese musical play *The Geisha*, caused great delight. It ran for no less than seven hundred and sixty performances: an unusually long duration in those days. Reverting to Shakespeare: the year 1894 was memorable for a hundred and twelve performances of *Twelfth Night*, and in the same year Humperdinck's charming fairy opera *Hansel and Gretel* continued for several months. The musical comedy *A Greek Slave* ran to three hundred and fifty-two performances in 1898.

Other theatres built in the 'nineties include The Coronet [1898]; Trafalgar Square, afterwards known as The Duke of York's, [1892], The Shakespeare [1896], Wyndham's [1899] and a number of East London and suburban theatres—notably The Lyric, Hammersmith, which opened in November, 1890—but lack of space precludes further details.

## PHYSICAL IMPROVEMENTS IN THE THEATRE

As one would imagine, considerable improvements were made in the mechanism of stage devices during the latter half of the nineteenth century, but most important, I think, was the progress made in lighting.

The lime-light was introduced somewhere around 1860 when it was discovered that a brilliant white light could be obtained by playing a burning mixture of oxygen and hydrogen on to a small block of lime, so that it became incandescent. The gases were stored in cylinders, which, of course, were apt to be inconvenient, and although the expression "the limes" is still in use in the theatre, this form of lighting has been superseded by the electric arc-lamp. The old limes enabled colour-lighting to be developed rapidly later in the century by the use of silks placed in the front of the lantern. Henry Irving was the first producer to exploit colour-lighting to its fullest extent.

The first complete system of electric lighting to be installed in a theatre was at the Paris Opéra in 1880, and the first to be seen in this country was at the Savoy Theatre, London, in 1882. Most of the other theatres followed the Savoy's example very quickly, and the introduction of rheostats (resistances which enable electric lights to be "dimmed") made possible the most delicate gradations of light when special effects were required.



IV A Scene from *Richard of Bordeaux*, by Gordon Daviot, produced by John Gielgud at the New Theatre in 1933. FRANCIS LISTER as Robert de Vere, JOHN GIELGUD as Richard, GWEN FFRANGCON-DAVIES as Anne of Bohemia and GEORGE HOWE as Simon Burleigh



## Chapter X

### THEATRE IN TRANSITION

MANY of the players and dramatists of the later Victorian period continued their work well into the twentieth century, and formed the vital links in the transition of the English theatre from the older pattern to the stage of to-day. For this reason it is important to review, briefly, some of the more outstanding personalities of the last century, and to mark, particularly, the significance of their work in the evolution of the modern theatre.

An outline has already been given of the career of Henry Irving, until the conclusion of his sixth American tour in May, 1900. After producing *Coriolanus* at the Lyceum in 1901, he went back to the United States, returning to England in March, 1902, to revive *Faust* at the Lyceum. He followed this with *The Merchant of Venice*, which proved to be his last appearance at this theatre, the company being unable to carry out various structural alterations demanded by the London County Council. So the famous Lyceum was closed, and was later converted into a music hall.

At Drury Lane, in 1903, Henry Irving staged *Dante*, a play by Sardou, translated by Laurence Irving. This involved enormous expense, but failed to win popular approval, a failure repeated in America when Irving made his final tour there for six months from October, 1903.

In 1905 Irving revived *Becket* at Drury Lane for his last London season, and once more played to large and enthusiastic audiences. This was the play in which he appeared at Bradford on the fateful night of October 13th, 1905, at the end of which he had a fatal seizure in the hotel at which he was staying. He was buried in Westminster Abbey on October 20th. Ellen Terry had once asked him half in jest if he thought it possible that he might be buried in Westminster Abbey, to which he replied, "I should like them to do their duty by me, and they will—they will." What the English theatre owes to Henry Irving is being recognised at last, and the publication of Laurence Irving's masterly biography should make this recognition doubly secure. His thirty years of management at the Lyceum made one of the noblest episodes in the romance of the

English theatre. He adorned his profession to a degree and in a manner which lifted the English stage to a new dignity and esteem. The knighthood which he received at the hands of Queen Victoria was not only a well-earned personal tribute, but a symbol of the new status he had won for the stage in England. It was no mere satisfaction of a personal ambition. He had, indeed, declined the honour when it was suggested to him in 1883, but twelve years later it was accepted as a mark of the respect he had won for the dramatic profession. Not the least of Irving's services to modern drama was his emphasis on the necessity and ministry of beauty, an emphasis much needed in an age of industrial and utilitarian values. He did not hesitate to affirm that "In the consideration of the Art of Acting, it must never be forgotten that its ultimate aim is beauty."

We have already recorded the retirement of Squire Bancroft, and his delightful wife, Marie Wilton, in 1885, but it should be mentioned that Bancroft returned to the stage twice after his retirement ; once to play with Irving in *The Dead Heart*, at The Lyceum in 1889, and again at the Garrick in 1893 for Sir John Hare.

The Bancrofts must share with Henry Irving credit for the pioneer work in preparing the way for the modern theatre. Marie Wilton inaugurated a revolution in comedy production, just as Irving did in romantic drama and Shakespearian comedy. The Bancrofts introduced what were then new features of production, and insisted on adequate rehearsals. Their enterprise was rewarded with dazzling success. For their initial venture Marie Wilton borrowed a thousand pounds and agreed to pay twenty pounds a week for the little theatre with which they began in Tottenham Court Road. On the first night there was only £150 in hand, but after twenty years the Bancrofts retired with a fortune of £180,000. Two years after Irving received his knighthood, Squire Bancroft was similarly honoured. He and his wife did much to make secure the foundations of the later English theatre.

We left the Kendals when they gave up the St. James's Theatre in 1888. They visited America in the following year, appearing at the Fifth Avenue Theatre, New York, in *A Scrap of Paper* (a prophetically modern title!).

Madge Kendal possessed a genius, both as producer and actress, the fame of which will endure. She had been trained at the Bristol Theatre Royal under Chute, the training ground which also gave the Terry sisters and Marie Wilton to the stage. It has been said of Dame Madge that she "knew the value to a hair's breadth of every movement of hand, foot and head."

Another personality destined at the end of the last century to take a leading part in the emergence of the modern English theatre, was Herbert Beerbohm Tree, who was also rewarded with the honour of knighthood in 1909. In the Victorian Jubilee year of 1897 Tree had built Her Majesty's Theatre, which became his theatrical home until the end of his career. In 1904 he founded the Academy of Dramatic Art, and in the following year started his famous series of Shakespearian Festivals. Born in London on December 17th, 1853, Tree had made his first appearance on the stage as an amateur in 1876. When still an amateur he played the part of Grimaldi in *The Life of an Actress*, at the Globe in February, 1878, and it was this which secured him his first professional engagement for a tour in the provinces. The first time he gained warm approval from the critics was when appearing in the part of the Marquis de Pontsable in the comic opera *Madame Favart*, at The Strand, in 1879.

Tree became his own manager eight years later, and had good fortune at once at the Comedy Theatre with the Russian play, *The Red Lamp* (W. Outram Tristram), in which he distinguished himself as Paul Demetrius. In the autumn of the same year came his first big speculation, the leasing of the Haymarket Theatre, to which he transferred *The Red Lamp*, having made a hundred and eighty-five appearances in it at the Comedy. Success continued to favour him, and Tree remained at the Haymarket for nearly ten years, when there followed his distinguished productions at the newly-built Her Majesty's.

Tree had a prominent share in giving popularity to what may be called the vogue of the drawing-room comedy. One of the best of these, the popularity of which has endured, was Wilde's, *A Woman of No Importance*, first produced in 1893, in which Tree played with great success the part of Lord Illingworth. Then in the autumn of 1895 came the sensational triumph of *Trilby*, which even Bernard Shaw agreed was the very thing for the West End stage at the time. Tree's Svengali was an example of perfect theatre. It was the profits from this outstanding success which made it possible for him to build Her Majesty's, and the actor-manager's ambition was realised. In the fine new theatre patrons were able to enjoy new amenities in comfortable furnishing and equipment. Tree also inaugurated a grandiose and spectacular type of production with scenic splendours unknown in his time. These opulent productions were a marked feature of the Shakespearian plays which he staged. They lacked the imaginative insight and unity

that had been achieved at the Lyceum, but were full of colour and vigour, and the Edwardian public went in tens of thousands to His Majesty's. Tree, beyond all question, gave a tremendous impetus to the growing popularity of the English theatre, and helped to make theatregoing a social habit in the society of the period.

Tree's management was much indebted to Louis Calvert, one of the most gifted Shakespearian producers. Calvert fashioned his technique upon some noteworthy Shakespearian productions given in Manchester in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and one of these provided the groundwork of Tree's admirable *Henry IV Part I*, at the Haymarket.

Judged by our present standards of Shakespearian production, when the tendency is to revert to the simplicity of the Elizabethan, the lavish methods employed by Tree present a striking contrast. He spared no trouble or expense to impress the eye with a pictorial Shakespeare. The stage had to be a built-up area. The audience could not fail to be impressed with the Alma-Tadema features of Caesar's Rome, the fauna of the wood near Athens, and the real turf, so that *Twelfth Night* led *Punch* to coin a word and describe it as "swardy." The weakness was that these imposing productions sometimes tended to clog the action of the play, and a critic on one occasion measured the intervals, finding that forty-five minutes had been occupied while elaborate sets were built or taken down behind the curtain.

One valuable achievement of Tree's must not be forgotten. At the beginning of the century came Stephen Phillips, who will be mentioned later. Phillips anticipated the verse drama, now reviving in Eliot and Christopher Fry, which, in the theatre of 1900 was a decided novelty. Tree, however, produced Phillips's *Herod* at Her Majesty's, in October, 1900, and this was a production colourful, lavish and rich, full of lines resonant and vibrant with verbal music.

Most of 1915 and 1916 Tree spent in America, and then returned to England to die in the following year. In theatrical history, he will remain linked with Her Majesty's, just as Irving's name will ever be joined with the Lyceum.

The nineteenth century was an era of famous actor-managers. Mention has already been made of Sir John Hare (whose original name was John Fairs) who in 1874 was actor-manager at the Court Theatre, with W. H. Kendal as a "silent" partner, following which after four prosperous years, he joined Kendal at St. James's, as has been mentioned elsewhere. Hare was born on May 16th, 1844, at

Giggleswick, Yorkshire. The theatre was a passion with him from boyhood. He was always incurring trouble at his first school in London by absenting himself to attend matinees. After the early death of his parents, Hare was sent to a local grammar school at Giggleswick, and after distinguishing himself in amateur theatricals managed to persuade his guardians he was more fitted for the stage than the Civil Service. After leaving school he studied for a while with Henry Leigh Murray in London, and made his first professional appearance at the Prince of Wales's Theatre, Liverpool, in September 1864, making the acquaintance of the Bancrofts at the same time.

His débüt in London was at the age of twenty-one, at the Prince of Wales's Theatre, in *Naval Engagement*, and a little later he made a deep impression as Lord Ptarmigan, in T. W. Robertson's comedy, *Society*. Hare's conspicuous ability was in what is usually termed "character acting"; he had the gift of literally assuming the physical traits of any personality portrayed. To this ability was due the fame he acquired in *A Pair of Spectacles*, while in a completely contrasted role he attained equal success in *The Gay Lord Quex*. Indeed, the part he played in this production with Irene Vanbrugh was something not easily forgotten.

Ellen Terry, whose life spanned the years from 1847 to 1928, must rank with Irving as a major influence in the making of the modern English theatre. In one sense she went beyond him. Irving remained to the end a great Victorian, but of Ellen Terry it may be said that although her fame was already achieved by the Victorian sunset, she was equally skilled in responding to the changing character of the Edwardian stage. An anecdote most luminous belongs to the part she was playing at the time of Irving's death. This was in Barrie's *Alice-Sit-by-the-Fire* (1905). It was in this play (at Manchester) that she broke down on the night after Irving's passing. Ellen Terry reached the words, "It's summer done, autumn begun. Farewell, summer, we don't know you any more. Alice-Sit-by-the-Fire henceforth. Taxis farewell—advance four-wheelers. I had a beautiful husband once, black as the raven was his hair"—here, Ellen Terry's voice failed as she wept, and the curtain was rung down.

An almost prophetic token was her appearance as Katherine in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, at Stratford-upon-Avon on Whit-Monday, 1902. Stratford then provided the one annual festival of the theatre in the English provinces, and Ellen Terry's appearance was the fulfilment of a promise made in jest to Frank Benson twenty years before. Later this festival was destined to expand into a season

marking one of the great events of the English' theatrical year, attracting visitors from all over the world, and this appearance of Ellen Terry was significant of her part as a link between the older generation and the one which was to come.

Again, her place in the theatrical transition was shown when she played Lady Cicely, in Bernard Shaw's *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*, in the year of her stage jubilee (1906), a part which she repeated in America two years later. Irving and Shaw represented a theatrical tradition and viewpoint in sharp contrast, but in Ellen Terry we find this contrast transmuted into the larger synthesis which was to mark the next important stage in the evolution of English drama. Yet another example of the gesture of promise she made to the coming theatre was her appearance as Hjordis, in *The Vikings* (an English version of Ibsen's work *The Vikings at Helgeland*) as early as 1903, at a time when English audiences had not learnt to appreciate Ibsen. Here, again, she moved from the Irving epoch into the Shavian age. She did not fail in her faith and discernment in regard to the changing and widening character of the modern English theatre.

Ellen Terry's stage jubilee in 1906 was celebrated by London playgoers with the greatest enthusiasm. On June 12th she played Beatrice at Drury Lane in *Much Ado about Nothing*, with no less than twenty-two of her relations in the cast. The subscription for her amounted to nearly ten thousand pounds. Her last appearance on the stage was at the Lyric, Hammersmith, in *Crossings* (Walter de la Mare) in 1925, though for several years she had acted but little, being engaged very fully in lecturing. In the same year she received the Order of the Grand Cross of the British Empire.

Dame Ellen passed away at the age of eighty, on July 21st, 1928, at Small Hythe, Tenterden, Kent, and her ashes were placed in a casket on the wall of St. Paul's Church, Covent Garden. Her house at Small Hythe was purchased by public subscription, and made into a memorial museum.

Ellen Terry had distinguished children in Gordon and Edith Craig, and her memory lives on as much for her wonderful charm and loveliness as a woman as for the great contribution she made as brilliant actress to the theatre of her time.

Two names which will remain prominently linked with the rise of modern comedy are those of Charles Hawtrey and William S. Penley. They are names gratefully recalled by many thousands in connection with *The Private Secretary* and *Charley's Aunt*, two of the most memorable successes in farcical comedy. Hawtrey had the

art which conceals art. The husky voice, the childlike innocence of manner, and a fine sense of time in phrase and gesture, were assets employed to the full in performances that lingered in the mind. Hawtrey was born at Eton, his father being a housemaster at the College. He was educated both there and at Rugby, and matriculated at Pembroke College, Oxford, but instead of entering the University turned to the stage, and secured an engagement to play the part of Edward Langton in *The Colonel*, while the then young Bancroft arranged that he should "walk-on" in *Money* at the Haymarket.

One cannot but feel that young Hawtrey's education, notwithstanding his scholastic opportunities, was marked by other features. His devotion to horse-racing began at a tender age. At fourteen we find him at the Derby with a precocious instinct that a rank outsider would win. The instinct was right, and the young Etonian realised £2 10s. od. This good luck did not hold, although in one race he did win £14,000. In later years, having made a profit of £100,000 on *The Private Secretary* he lost it all on the Turf.

The story of this amazingly successful farce is of interest. Hawtrey produced *The Private Secretary* while in his early twenties after much effort in finding the necessary money, and Beerbohm Tree played the part of the Curate. It is said that it was Tree who added the now familiar gag, "I don't like London" and, in fact, much is due to Tree for making the Rev. Robert Spalding the classical figure of farce which he became.

Later Hawtrey purchased all rights in the farce, and took it to the Globe Theatre, where Penley played the role of the Curate. History has it that the first pit and gallery queues ever seen in London gathered outside the Globe for this play, which ran for two years.

Another outstanding success with which Hawtrey was concerned was *A Message from Mars*, which had a run of over five hundred performances, and many theatregoers will still remember his role in Walter Hackett's play, *Ambrose Applejohn's Adventure*. Hawtrey found his place in the order of theatrical knights, receiving the honour in 1922, a year before his death.

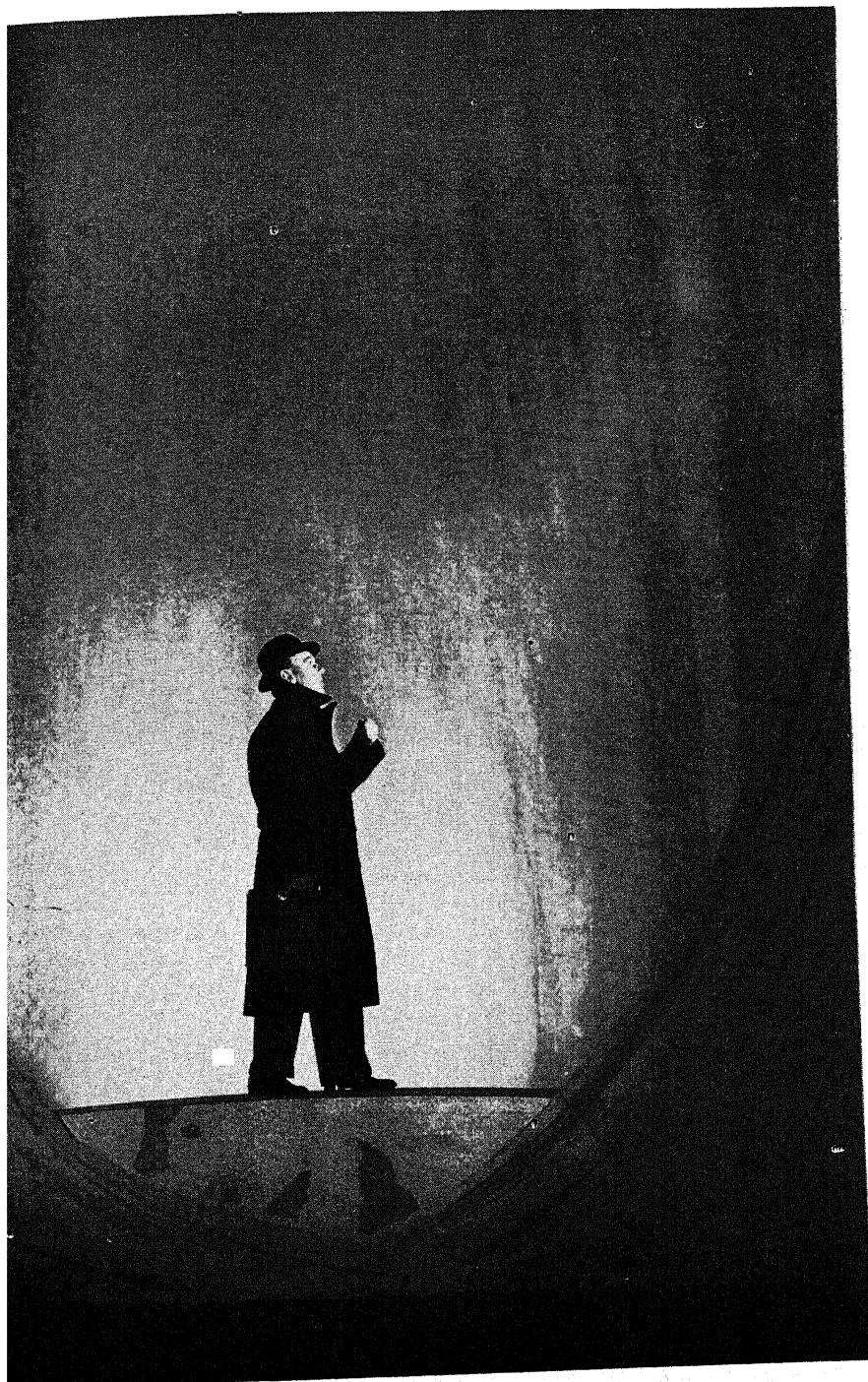
William S. Penley, although a prominent actor-manager of his time, will remain in memory for his part in *Charley's Aunt*, although he had shared with Hawtrey the honours of *The Private Secretary*. But his part as Lord Fancourt Babberley in *Charley's Aunt* was an impersonation which will not be forgotten. When this farce was transferred to the Globe in 1893 it broke all records with a run of

fourteen hundred and sixty-six performances, extending over four years. There must surely be few of the older generation of playgoers who do not recall the famous poster of the old "lady" fleeing for her life over the caption "Charley's Aunt—still running." This classic evergreen is still revived most years in the West End at Christmastime, and has even been turned into an American musical.

The dawn of the century marked a successful venture by another distinguished actor-manager, Charles Wyndham, at the theatre in Charing Cross Road which bears his name, and which had then just been opened. In October, 1900, Wyndham produced *Mrs. Dane's Defence*, written for Wyndham's company by Henry Arthur Jones. It was a triumph. At the final curtain there was a tremendous storm of applause. "You could lean up against it," said Wyndham. Previously Wyndham had for twenty-three years carried the management of the Criterion, while, following the opening of the Charing Cross Road building, he inaugurated another theatre familiar to present-day playgoers, the New, in St. Martin's Lane. He was knighted in 1902 at the time of the coronation of King Edward VII. After his death in 1919 it was found he had left a fortune of two hundred thousand pounds.

The brilliant galaxy of actor-managers of this period included Cyril Maude, who had a ten years' partnership with Frederick Harrison. Maude was himself an actor of distinction, excelling in the revivals of old English comedies, with his wife, Winifred Emery, as an ideal leading lady. He was to be seen at his best as old Hardcastle, Bob Acres, and Sir Peter Teazle. Later the company transferred to the Playhouse Theatre, where their success continued until the outbreak of the first World War.

The Edwardian decade saw the rise of another actor-manager who made a great reputation,—Gerald du Maurier. An easy versatility was his outstanding quality and a seemingly effortless artistry which gave him command of widely differing characters. While perfectly at home with the whimsicality of Barrie, he was equally at ease in a play like *Bulldog Drummond*. At the end of the Edwardian decade, when he was twenty-eight years old, du Maurier joined the ranks of the actor-managers, entering into partnership with Frank Curzon at Wyndham's Theatre. London experienced its first crook play in 1906, when du Maurier appeared as Raffles. *Raffles* enjoyed great popularity for a year, and then followed another outstanding success in *Brewster's Millions*, one of the most widely-known of comedies, having been the delight of a host of



22 RALPH RICHARDSON as JOHNSON in the final scene of J. B. Priestley's



91. JOHN GIELGUD as Lear, STEPHEN HAGGARD as the Fool and LEWIS



92. MICHAEL REDGRAVE and LESLIE BANKS in *The Duke in Darkness*  
at the Old Vic, St. James's, 1943.



93. JOHN GIELGUD as Macbeth at the Piccadilly Theatre, 1942



94. JOHN GIELGUD in *Love for Love* at the Phoenix, 1942. (From the painting by Anthony Devas)



95. RALPH RICHARDSON and SYBIL THORNDIKE in *Peer Gynt* at the New



96. JOYCE REDMAN as Anne and LAURENCE OLIVIER as Richard in the Old Vic Theatre Company's production of *Richard III* (1944)

97. Peer Gynt (RALPH RICHARDSON) and the Green Woman (MARGARET LEIGHTON) in the Old Vic Theatre Company's production of *Peer Gynt* at the New Theatre, 1944





98. JOHN GIELGUD as Hamlet, Haymarket, 1944

touring companies. Then, as an instance of du Maurier's adroit versatility, one recalls his tragic rôle in *Not in our Stars* at Wyndham's near the end of his career in 1924; while in the following year, in complete contrast, came his equally successful Lord Dilling in Frederick Lonsdale's sparkling satire, *The Last of Mrs Cheyney*.

The spectator was always impressed by the easy naturalness of du Maurier's acting. Yet, of course for histrionic purposes there must always be, however slight and subtle, a certain exaggeration,—some degree of special emphasis. Thus, Sir Gerald once pointed out that in real life he tapped his cigarette three times, on the stage he tapped six times.

As the great actor-managers pass before our eyes, another worthy of special tribute is George Alexander. In certain respects Alexander was in the true Irving tradition, and in its rewards and status the profession of the present century owes much to the solid contribution made by Sir George (he was knighted in 1911). Truly, Irving set a precedent of courtly honours in the dramatic profession which since then has been consistently maintained.

In 1881, when he was twenty-one years old, George Alexander had been engaged by Irving as one of his company at the Lyceum, and demonstrated in his later methods and wise discernment how much he had learned from his former chief. In 1891 Alexander took over the St. James's Theatre, and for twenty-seven years upheld there an exceptionally high standard, representative of much of the best late Victorian and Edwardian dramatic talent, both of players and playwrights.

His management was marked by a generous regard for the welfare and dignity of the profession. The players were paid for rehearsals, and given generous and long contracts. Frequently he produced a play with no star part for himself, but with excellent opportunities for others of the company. He will be remembered for the opportunity given to talented players who subsequently adorned the English stage, including Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Irene Vanbrugh, Henry Ainley and Marie Tempest. The essentially English stage was encouraged and developed by Alexander to an extent which gave the St. James's Theatre a prominent place in the history of our native drama. Out of sixty-two full length, and nineteen one-act, plays produced by Alexander, only eight were by foreigners. He helped, beyond most, to make dramatic writing in England both important and profitable.

It must be true of most great players, and, indeed, one of the ingredients of their success, that they possess a genuine love of

acting, and are in their element when the curtain is up. One remarkable exception was Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson (another in the galaxy of knights). He once remarked, "Never at any time have I gone on to the stage without longing for the moment when the curtain would come down on the last act."

It is rather surprising, therefore, that when he eventually agreed to take over management it was with the frank avowal that he would gladly have remained a mere actor, to be called upon by anyone who wanted his services. His vocation for the stage none can doubt.

Forbes-Robertson possessed all the attributes for distinction in his field. Fame came to him quickly. He was playing leading parts with the Bancrofts as early as 1878, when only twenty-five, although five years earlier his interest in the stage had been purely amateur. In 1889, with Hare, he scored a triumph in Pinero's *The Profligate*. Three years later at the Lyceum he gave one of the greatest portrayals of Buckingham, in *Henry VIII*, while one critic has justly claimed that he was the greatest Hamlet of his generation. His rendering of this part was perfect of its type, and when Irving read the notices he remarked: "Well, you've done it. Now you must go and play Hamlet all over the world." As a Shakespearian actor Forbes-Robertson was one of the greatest in the history of the English theatre. His rendering of Caesar in Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* stands without rival, not even excepting Laurence Olivier's recent masterly performance in this role.

To-day it seems surprising to recall that an actor of this genius was prepared to lend his energies to such a slight morality play as Jerome's, *The Passing of the Third Floor Back*. Yet when staged at St. James's Theatre, in 1908, this play was hailed with acclaim, and enjoyed a long and successful run. Possibly there was more significance in it than modern eyes can discern. What is certain is that this play enhanced the appeal of Forbes-Robertson for thousands of playgoers at the time, even though his reputation rests upon more solid foundations.

Sir John Martin-Harvey will long be remembered as one who carried into the modern period much of the technique and melodrama of the later Victorian period. His first stage appearance was in 1881, and in the following year he was playing in the Irving company at the Lyceum, in *Romeo and Juliet*. He remained at the Lyceum for fourteen years, but his great success came as Sydney Carton in *The Only Way*, a play which is associated with his memory in the same way as that of Irving is with *The Bells*, another instance, it has been suggested, of the fascination which a poor play may have

for a good actor. But as an example of Martin-Harvey's varied powers many will recall his masterly performance in 1919, as Cyrille van Belle, Maeterlinck's Burgomaster of Stilemonde, who defied the Germans in Belgium and was condemned to be shot. Those who imagined that this gifted actor was only effective in the somewhat flamboyant rôles which he usually played, must have been surprised by the quiet restraint, and the simple, impressive dignity which he gave to the Burgomaster, while, in the late evening of his career, not the least of his triumphs was his last *Oedipus at Covent Garden*. With Irving he belonged to a noble group of actors who felt a passion for their vocation, and cherished ideals for the English theatre, the fulfilment of which they did not live to see. One recalls how Martin-Harvey, in a moving speech at Stratford-upon-Avon in the summer of 1919, mourned the end of the great line of actor-managers :

“ To-day we have no one who will sacrifice himself for the benefit of the higher drama in London . . . . who will, or can, stem the tide of mere commercialism beneath which we are now submerged.”

But just beyond his range of sight better times were approaching, of which the great Shakespearian Festival each year at Stratford-upon-Avon was to be one of the most certain symbols, while the promise of a National Theatre on the South Bank of the Thames has also now become an assured fact. But all honour to those who “ died in faith, not having received the promise.”

Another who was dedicated to the realisation of this greater theatre was Sir Frank Benson, whose work was markedly significant in the theatre of the transition. Many successful players of to-day owe their reputation to the wonderful experience they gained when working under his guidance. His life spanned the years from 1858 until 1939, so that he was essentially related to the great development in the theatre which is the theme of this chapter. His rich abilities were manifest even to an advanced age. At moments Benson could flash out the glow of youth, even at seventy-two, when he played *Hamlet*. His gay and joyous spirit will never be forgotten by the grateful group of players who are proud to call themselves Bensonians. At the beginning of the century this group included such names as Henry Ainley, Frank Rodney, Leslie Faber, Harcourt Williams, George Weir, Lyall Swete, Oscar Asche, Arthur Whitby, Matheson Lang, H. O. Nicholson and Lily Brayton.

The Provinces, especially, owe a lasting debt to the memory of Sir Frank, for it was he, with his devoted and enthusiastic company,

who toured England and brought the best of Shakespeare to a responsive public far from London at a time when none of the now numerous Repertory theatres existed. One incident helps to recall how dauntless was the spirit of this ardent young team. Early in 1900 a fire in Newcastle-on-Tyne, where the company had been playing, destroyed all the wardrobe and the prompt books. Irving provided armour and costumes of his own, the company tackling without hesitation the task of providing a wardrobe. Lady Benson wistfully remarked that the Song of the Shirt might have been composed for the opening of the season at the Lyceum, during which seven Shakespearian plays, together with *The Rivals*, were presented with such success that few were aware of the immense difficulties caused by the fire.

There was a touch of splendid romance in the circumstances attending Benson's knighthood. In the spring of 1916, in the middle of the first World War, honour was paid to Shakespeare in a brilliant celebration at Drury Lane. On the afternoon of May 2 there was a fine production of *Julius Caesar*, followed by an impressive pageant of Shakespearian characters. The King and Queen were present in the Royal Box. At the final curtain, while the audience still applauded, the day's most moving event was being enacted in the ante-room to the Royal box. The King had sent for Frank Benson, who came in response to the command clothed in the blood-stained robes of his part, and with the ashen face, half-bald wig, blue lips and sunken eyes of the dead Caesar. There and then Benson was knighted with a sword which Arthur Collins, manager of Drury Lane, had sent for in haste. The letter offering Benson the knighthood had followed him all over England, and he had not received it until eleven that morning. By the end of the afternoon, therefore, when Benson appeared as Coriolanus during the character pageant, and walked down the black-and-gold stairway to the front of the stage, he had become Sir Frank. Benson must have felt the romantic thrill of the circumstances in which he had achieved his knighthood on this day of Shakespeare's Tercentenary, within the historic walls of Drury Lane, and in the presence of so many of the gifted players he had himself trained.

One may believe with reason that in that moment of recognition and triumph Benson gave a grateful thought to Irving, the early pioneer, who had won for the profession so much honour. He no doubt recalled the inspiration he had received, when, as a young undergraduate at Oxford, he was largely responsible for a memorable amateur production of the *Agamemnon* in Balliol Hall. For,

following this, Irving, who had seen and admired the performance, remarked, "Why do you not band together, work, study, and become a company, the like of which this age has never seen? We have the technical skill upon the stage, we have the traditions. The difficulty nowadays is to get a company that has the literary mind and the trained intellectuality which is associated with university students."

Sir Frank Benson fully realised Irving's wish, and brought together under his own leadership a band of men and women of outstanding talent and ability. It was a fellowship destined to influence vitally the theatre of the new century, and was not one of the least of the achievements of the Edwardian tradition.

## Chapter XI

### A FATEFUL DECADE

THE dominant fact of the second ten years of the present century was the change wrought in almost every aspect of our life and society by the first World War. They did not leave the theatre untouched, but the best way of viewing this fateful decade from the standpoint of the English theatre, is to observe its three phases. There was the four years between the passing of King Edward and the outbreak of the War; the conditions during the four years of conflict, and the type of theatre which we see emerging from those years of change, in the period which followed immediately after.

The first period, the four years before the outbreak of war, were for the most part, an Edwardian afterglow. One of the most significant features was the rise of an increasing group of talented players, who were to lead the English stage in later years. Of these there must be noted some gifted actresses whose names are now so familiar. Had we visited the Duke of York's Theatre in 1910 we might have seen a young actress, by name, Sybil Thorndike,<sup>1</sup> playing Romp in a revival of *Prunella*, or three years later, seeing her again in St. John Ervine's *Jane Clegg*, we should no doubt have felt assured of the growing power which was to make her one of the greatest actresses of the modern English stage. In the same year we might have seen *Troilus and Cressida*, and have been impressed by the performance as Cressida of a young, unknown actress, Edith Evans. Again, in the same year, had we gone to see the sparkling comedy by the master playwright, Henry Arthur Jones, at the Playhouse, we should have been delighted by the gay vivacity of Marie Tempest, then becoming a major actress.

Great among actresses remains the name of Mrs. Patrick Campbell. Already she had made an impression as Paula in Pinero's, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, to a degree, indeed, that placed her in the front rank of fame. Now in the period under review she achieved yet another triumph as Eliza, in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. In retrospect one can indulge a smile at "Mrs. Pat's" volatile

<sup>1</sup>See *Sybil Thorndike*, by Russell Thorndike (Rockliff), 1950

temperament. At times it was more than a trial to her managers. So much so that when Shaw offered his comedy to Alexander for production at St James's it was declined, for Alexander had become a little exhausted by the vagaries of his one-time leading lady. So *Pygmalion* was staged by Tree at His Majesty's, and in consequence Shaw was one of the few leading dramatists of the time who missed a St. James's production.

Two sisters who at that time attained a leading place on the English stage were the Vanbrugh's, Violet and Irene. In earlier days Violet had been given £100 by her father, Canon Barnes, and sent to London in charge of an old nurse. With the inspiring friendship of Ellen Terry to aid her she quickly made good. In 1894 she had married Arthur Bourchier, gratefully remembered by a previous generation of schoolchildren for his part as Long John Silver, in *Treasure Island*. Her younger sister, Irene, had proved an outstanding player in the later Pinero dramas. She had been memorable as Nina, in Pinero's, *His House in Order*, when it was produced at St. James's Theatre in 1906. Another of Dame Irene Vanbrugh's successes was in the leading rôle she took in *The Gay Lord Quex*.

At the beginning of this second decade of the century, playgoers were becoming increasingly aware of the rise and influence of a new group of dramatists. The pattern of their work suggested the deliberate use of the stage as a medium for the analysis and criticism of contemporary social life and its institutions. One of the most prominent and assertive was Bernard Shaw. George Bernard Shaw to some, though he hated nothing more than to be "Georged" in print. At the end of the Edwardian decade Shaw was already an established playwright, for his first play, *Widowers' Houses*, had been produced at the Royalty Theatre in 1892, when it had received a mixed reception, although its exposure of the slum landlords won him great favour in Liberal circles. This had been followed by further daring ventures in defiance of the reservations and preferences of the time. *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, an indictment of the conditions that promote prostitution, was suppressed by the Lord Chamberlain, while the first production of *Arms and the Man* in 1894 had not proved a financial success, although in subsequent revivals the play came much into favour. Then followed *Candida*, considered by some to be Shaw's best comedy, which was first produced by a touring company in the Provinces, and their success was responsible for the Stage Society's production at the Strand Theatre in 1900, with Janet Achurch in the title rôle (the wife of a

clergyman who is tempted to run away with a young poet) and Granville-Barker as Marchbanks. The play also proved a great success in America.

There could be no doubt about Shaw's versatility, for his next play was as different from *Candida* as anything well could be. *John Bull's Other Island*. Revivals have proved that it remains as amusing as when, at a Command Performance in 1906, King Edward VII laughed so heartily that he broke the chair in which he was sitting.

There is no space here to review in detail Shaw's further work of the earlier period. Most of it by now has become familiar to multitudes of modern playgoers. The important point to remember is that Shaw was a pioneer of vision and courage, who launched his plays, which were searching and provocative criticisms of customs and characters in modern society, at a period when such criticism was far from congenial to the prevailing mental climate. But the tide of thought was flowing with him. The period of Edwardian afterglow was increasingly analytical, and mildly revolutionary. The established order was under fire. The Fabian mood and approach became increasingly popular. A militant feminism, expressed in the Suffragette movement, was one symptom of increasing social challenge, and the writings of Mr. H. G. Wells were congenial to the period. There was a marked disposition to question and probe conventions, beliefs and institutions that had long been accepted almost without question. The mood was increasingly articulate through the group of dramatists now coming into prominence, of whom Shaw had been a pioneer and forerunner.

The old and the new were very much in conflict, and the Censor kept a vigilant eye on the features of the new drama. Already he had fallen foul of Shaw, and a few years before the beginning of this second decade, had vetoed a brilliant work by one of the most gifted playwrights of our century, Harley Granville-Barker. In his masterly domestic tragedy, *Waste*, Granville-Barker had dared to mention an illegal operation, and because of this the Censor refused his licence. Such was the fate, for a time, of a play of real distinction, written by one whom Shaw called "the most distinguished and incomparably the most cultivated person whom circumstances had driven into the theatre at that time." It was this incident that caused an inquiry into the Censorship in 1910, but it was another ten years before *Waste* was given a public performance.

Granville-Barker occupies a place in the making of the modern English theatre, the importance of which cannot easily be exaggerated. At the Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square an appeal was

being made to a public prepared to think, and to respond to the deeper accents sounded by the kind of plays for which the Royal Court provided a home. To-day Ibsen has become a familiar feature of the London stage, and Tchekov is a box office success. They were not so in the earlier years of the century. To Granville-Barker there is owed a great debt for preparing the way for the drama of the mind, the plays of criticism and challenge: the plays that were like mirrors reflecting the human soul, and the complexity of social conventions, and institutions through which it found expression.

It was in February, 1904, that J. E. Vedrenne, manager of the Royal Court Theatre for J. H. Leigh, invited Harley Granville-Barker, then a young actor-dramatist of assured promise, to take part in a revival of some Shakespearian plays. Granville-Barker, who was a disciple of Shaw, agreed on condition that Vedrenne would take responsibility for some Shawian matinees. So began a distinguished partnership, destined to exert a very great influence in promoting the more serious drama in the later part of the Edwardian era, and the years that immediately followed.

There was a playwright presented at the Royal Court who for the moment seems forgotten. St. John Hankin, whose name may still be unknown to many, achieved rediscovery, though short-lived, when John Gielgud revived *The Return of the Prodigal*, at the Globe Theatre in 1948. Oscar Wilde has remained more or less in the favour that he first enjoyed. His flashing wit and glittering epigrams still arrest and entertain modern audiences as they did the later Victorians and Edwardians. It is the more singular then that Hankin, with an urbane humour, more mature and mellow than Wilde's, should so far lack the same popularity.

Not the least of the achievements of the Royal Court Theatre was the prominence given to two other dramatists whose work shared one quality in common that of compassion, a quality too rare in much modern drama. These two writers were John Masefield and John Galsworthy. One was becoming known in discriminating circles as a poet with a style and power certain to give him a place among the great English poets. Masefield is now our Poet Laureate, and, looking back over the years, one is impressed by a life of singularly varied experience and achievement. He has not yet had the recognition in the theatre that his plays merit. It was another tribute to the vision of Granville-Barker that he recognised the power resident in Masefield, and particularly his sensitive reaction to the pathos and suffering of the simple and obscure. It is

true that he was represented at the Royal Court by one of his lesser works, *The Campden Wonder*, but in the summer of 1908, Granville-Barker and Vedrenne arranged some matinees at the Haymarket, of Masefield's most moving play, *The Tragedy of Nan*, a work full of dramatic power, lit by a spiritual compassion and moving tenderness of treatment which lift it out of the temporal category of plays that date, and give it a place with works making an appeal to every age.

In John Galsworthy, like Masefield, the "quality of mercy" was ever a prominent theme. There was in him the same compassion that was conspicuous in Dickens. At the beginning of this second decade of the century, Galsworthy's name could be linked with Shaw's for ability to present what has been called the Theatre of Ideas. A better title might be the Theatre of Criticism, for, so far, any play which is of value must be a play of ideas. What was new was that the English theatre was assuming some of the functions of the platform and the pulpit. It was becoming a moral and spiritual force, as well as a medium of entertainment. A new community of playgoers was emerging, not asking simply for the well polished society plays of Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones, or the glittering wit of a clever farce, but concerned to see the limelight play upon the society of the time; its laws, conventions and institutions. In 1909 Galsworthy had exposed the wastefulness and futility of industrial disputes in *Strife*. It was a searching analysis, fair, balanced and convincing, and its merit is suggested by the welcome it received in television in the autumn of 1950, forty-one years after its first production.

Galsworthy continued the social criticism with *Justice*, which opened a noteworthy repertory season at the Duke of York's Theatre in 1910. The play was a searching exposure of the horror of solitary confinement as a form of punishment. One short, wordless scene in the play could never be forgotten. It had an astonishing reception, welcomed by an audience who stayed in the theatre until half-an-hour before midnight, shouting, "We want Galsworthy" until Granville-Barker appeared to tell them that the author had gone. Winston Churchill, who was then Home Secretary, was greatly impressed, and one result was that the penalty of solitary confinement was reconsidered.

Before *Strife*, Galsworthy had already proved his ability as a playwright of distinction in *The Silver Box*, originally produced at the Court Theatre in 1906, and with *Joy*, at the Savoy in the following year. At the end of this momentous decade, St. Martin's Theatre presented another masterly example of Galsworthy's social criticism

in *The Skin Game*, with its graphic portrayal of the conflict between a new rich class, without tradition, already emerging as a feature of modern English life, and the old order of nobility, threatened with extinction. Two years later appeared one of his most searching plays, *Loyalties*, touching another aspect of what may well be called the dilemmas of modern man.

But London, in those declining Edwardian years, with lights fading, to go out in the disaster of the first Great War, was not all Galsworthian. The Edwardian accent still lingered, and the theatre reflected in the play titles of the time, the varied assortment to be enjoyed. Here were offered *The Belle of Bond Street*; *The Holy City*; *Decorating Clementine*, and *The Whispering Well*. Odd bits of old melodrama were still popular, with a dash of broad farce. Something of the gay abandon of the earlier years, and the lilt of haunting tunes could still be found under the Edwardes' management at Daly's and the Gaiety. But these were features of a theatrical pattern that was accepted and familiar. The play of social criticism, of which Galsworthy was representative, was new and significant. It was indicative of others to follow. If any wavered in this line of attack there was always the leader, Bernard Shaw, to inspire them. True, at this time, "G.B.S." varied his touch and theme very widely in the seven plays that he gave the theatre before the summer of 1914. Some of his most trenchant criticisms were to come later, and the plays of Shaw, we must remember, are not only to be seen but to be read, including the Prefaces, which are not optional introductions, but essential philosophical expositions of the theme which always give real reward for reading.

Granville-Barker contributed another excellent sociological study in *The Madras House*, first presented at the Duke of York's in 1910. Its significance, in relation to its time, is the lively debate it contains on the place of women in society. It was the era of the struggle for the political franchise for women, and the theme was intensely relevant. Another robust playwright, whose distinguished work lent power and virility to the theatre of the time, was St. John Ervine. 1911 saw the production of his *Mixed Marriage*, and two years later came *Jane Clegg*, by the same author, with its dramatic study of religious and class conflict, providing, too, a fine opportunity for Sybil Thorndike, which she did not miss. In 1915, this gifted writer and critic wrote one of his most powerful plays, *John Ferguson*, although it was not staged in London until after the war.

As though to mark the dissolving world of the time, the plays of challenge and criticism were not slow in coming, and they revealed

the best dramatic talent of that day, a talent, in fact, which remains outstanding. In 1911 came the play by a dramatist of the Manchester school, Stanley Houghton. In *Hindle Wakes* he presented another conflict, that of rebellion against paternal authority, which had already been intimated by a previous play by the same author, *The Younger Generation*. In *Hindle Wakes*, the spirit of the time was again expressed. It is a fearless study of integrity and independence of a woman who declines to marry for the sake of respectability a man she does not love. The theme sounds conventional enough now, but it provided the theme for a play of striking dramatic ability and power, and one that a quarter of a century later could still move an audience to eager interest and keen discussion.

#### YEARS OF WAR

Then came the momentous event of this fateful decade, the first World War. For the theatre we may date this as the eclipse of the Edwardian epoch. The first effect on the theatre, as on all aspects of our life, was one of confusion and uncertainty. Productions were put on quickly, and as quickly taken off. Then after a few months there came what must be viewed as a "boom" period. It did not much matter what was offered. There was a ready public. Many items were purely topical in title and theme. The dramatic world was full of hazard, and a play of excellence, as well as of mediocrity, may well prove a speedy failure in an atmosphere vague and uncertain. A glance now at the titles of the period suggests the astonishing variety of the offerings. In one house we could have seen *Jolly Jack Tar*, in another *Daddy Long-legs*, while the Lyceum presented us with such items as *Seven Days' Leave* and *The Female Hun*, strange trifles of the time, now decently buried with no hope of resurrection. Certainly there was more satisfying material, even among lighter entertainment, for Jose Collins, a gifted artiste, was making her reputation in *The Maid of the Mountains*, and memories may still linger over the charm of Vachell's *Quinneys*. Looking back we can mark some phenomenal successes, chief of which was the strange mixture of play and revue, *Chu Chin Chow*, a work written at top speed by Oscar Asche. Staged at His Majesty's on August 31st, 1916, it outlasted the war with 2,238 performances.

Melodies that lingered and echoed long after the war were born of successful musicals of the time, full of tuneful lilt. At the Gaiety there was George Grossmith with Madge Saunders, singing, "They didn't believe me"; while at the Alhambra one of the Bing Boy

revues brought together George Robey and Violet Lorraine in one of the most popular songs of the time, "If you were the only Girl in the World," the melody of which to-day always recalls the grim days of the first World War. In this category of musicals there was much of lesser worth, without wit or tune, which has long since been forgotten.

What were some of the leading dramatists doing? The stage had little of any importance from Shaw, but we now know that these were the years when he was at work on his massive *Back to Methuselah*, and *Heartbreak House*, so for him it was a creative epoch. In contrast to the grim world of the time Barrie had given a tribute of his whimsicality and sentiment. In 1916, *A Kiss for Cinderella*, met with appreciative audiences, although far from being Barrie's best work. A year later this was overshadowed by one of his best plays, *Dear Brutus*, with the wonderful bit of stagecraft of the final act. At Christmas, year by year, *Peter Pan* appeared, as usual. There seemed little in the theatre of those troubled years to tempt the playwright. Then came a memorable night in 1918 when Lily Brayton released a white dove of peace which flew about the auditorium at His Majesty's. The war was over. The theatre had survived. The last phase of the decade had come.

Now one must mark the features of recovery and advance. One of the most promising began at the "Blood-and-Flea Pit!" If this unattractive title now puzzles, let us recall that it was the name which had been given to a then almost dismantled theatre in Hammersmith, which, to dignify it by its proper name, was the Lyric Opera House. Near the end of the war it had been marked by an actor of distinction, who was also a man of courage and vision, Nigel Playfair (Sir Nigel, as he was to become in 1928). He had read an interesting chronicle play by a young poet and dramatist, John Drinkwater. It was *Abraham Lincoln*, which had been staged in Birmingham. Playfair brought the Birmingham Repertory Company to play it at the Lyric, Hammersmith, where it ran for a year. He told an amusing anecdote in his *Story of the Lyric Theatre*:

"They were running *The Private Secretary* at the King's Theatre opposite at this time; and at the end of the first scene one night a puzzled voice was heard to inquire, 'Well, and which of these blokes is Abraham Lincoln?'"

During the next decade the Lyric, Hammersmith, was destined to enjoy its zenith of success. The theatre had been acquired by Playfair with the co-operation of Arnold Bennett and Amner Hall.

It had cost them no more than £2,050, while the capital of the syndicate was "not enough to run a musical comedy for a week." It was at the Hammersmith Lyric that Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* had its remarkable run of three-and-a-half-years, and helped Londoners to realise how much they owed to the enterprise and insight of Nigel Playfair. He also discovered a librettist and lyric writer who was soon to become a familiar name to thousands of theatre goers—A. P. Herbert, on whom has fallen the mantle of W. S. Gilbert.

One feature of the last year of this period, which marked the coming of the precarious peace, was the staging of plays by foreign writers. This was something like a reaction from the narrow insularity of the war years. Rostand's *L'Aiglon* appeared, with Marie Lohr in the leading part, and Robert Loraine gave a fine performance in a play marked by delicate images and fancies, *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Mention has already been made of Martin-Harvey's impressive rendering of Maeterlinck's *Burgomaster of Stilemonde*. It was an intimation of the riches available for the playgoer from sources outside our national boundaries. A wider appreciation and a more liberal hospitality were beginning to possess many who visited the English theatre. One recalled the almost daring ventures of an earlier period in introducing Ibsen and Tchekov to English audiences. Now the time was approaching when these masters would receive the welcome and appreciation for which they had so long waited on the English stage. The pattern of the modern English theatre was beginning to appear more clearly. Immediately following the war, America offered little, but, of English writers, Arnold Bennett staged an able play in *Judith*, gratefully received by many who had been delighted by his earlier success, *The Great Adventure*, and in the first post-war year he also gave the theatre another success in *Sacred and Profane Love*.

Everyone who was seriously interested in the future of the English theatre in 1919 must have wondered what the unknown years ahead would bring forth. It was a feature to be expected that the period of national upheaval had seen much on the stage that was trivial and ephemeral, but a real deposit of promise was left over, and much quiet work had been maturing that was to enrich the theatre of the near future. At the end of this decade forty-two theatres were open in London, but from a glance at the programmes it seemed uncertain what would be the shape of things to come. The established dramatists were not, at the moment, offering much.

Shaw seemed content with a revival of *Arms and the Man*, dating from 1894. Somerset Maugham presented a smart and amusing farce, *Home and Beauty*, which gave Charles Hawtrey a part of which he made the best (some of us can still see him rattling the overcooked beefsteak in the frying pan). Robert Hitchens had a success with the then popular *The Voice from the Minaret*, and in the lighter field *Tilly of Bloomsbury* and *Lord Richard in the Pantry* had popular appeal. Shakespeare was not forgotten. Maurice Moscovitch was an impressive Shylock when J. B. Fagan presented *The Merchant of Venice* at the Court—which still offered a feast of good things. The same production included a gracious actress, Mary Grey, as Portia, and the talent of Edith Evans as Nerissa. At Covent Garden Martin-Harvey gave a competent *Hamlet*. Musical pieces were not lacking—there were nine of them running, with *Chu Chin Chow* still going its seemingly endless way. So the English theatre awaited the future.

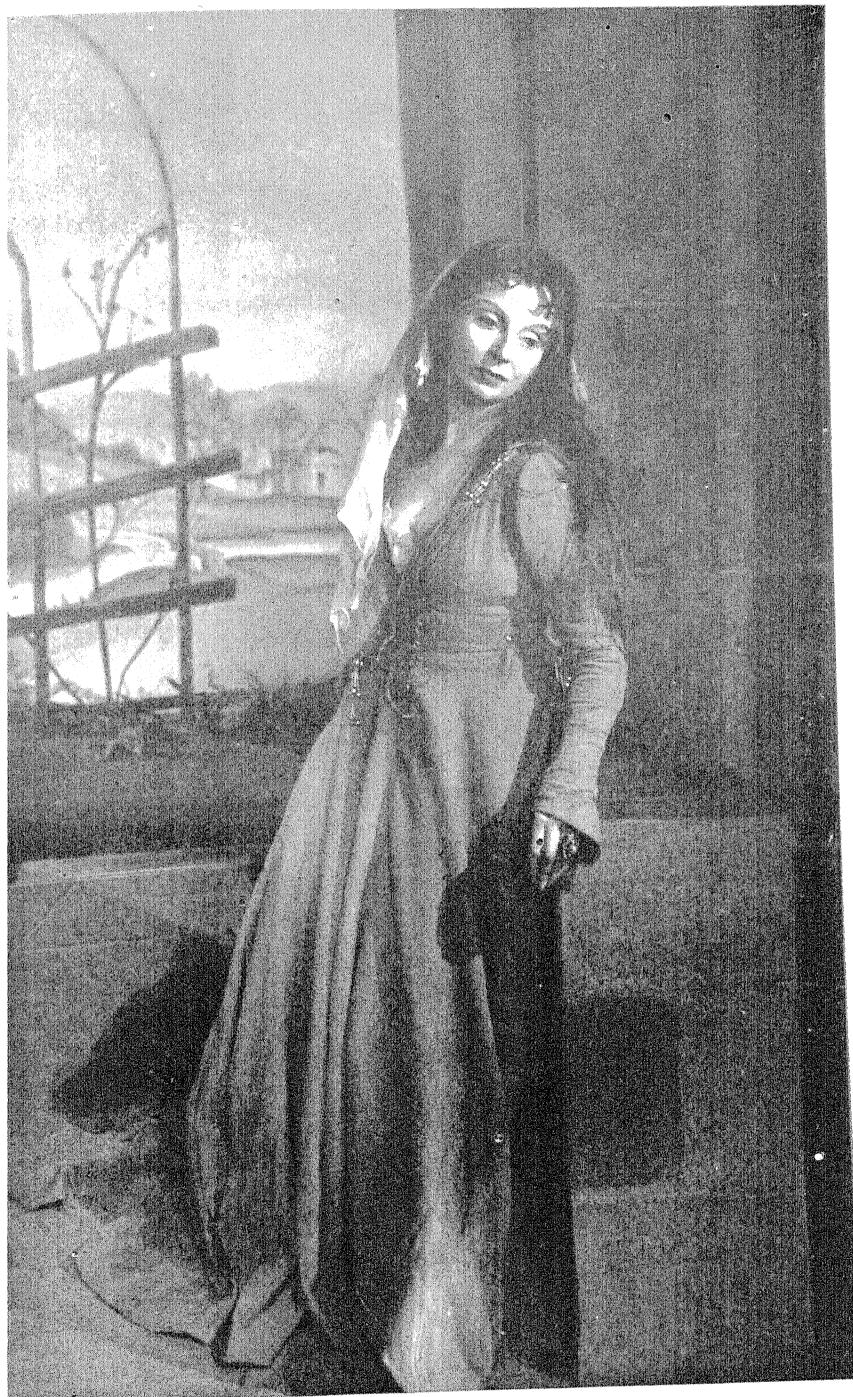
## Chapter XII

### IRISH CREATION AND PROVINCIAL AWAKENING

THE influences that make up the story of the English theatre are not all indigenous. Indeed, as we look back over the last half-century we can now estimate the significance of some fertile achievements that have served to adorn with distinction the modern English stage. These are, for the most part, linked with names that will remain immortal in the romance of our drama.

One of the first to receive tribute must be Miss A. E. F. Horniman, who made possible the rise of the vivid poetic drama associated with the little Abbey Theatre, Dublin. Until this noteworthy playhouse was destroyed by fire in 1951, it stood as a symbol and reminder of some of the best and most inspiring activity in the modern theatre. Miss Horniman with faith and vision, expressed practically with unstinted generosity, glimpsed the possibility for the stage of the genius of poetry and passion incarnate in a group of Irishmen. She made a gift of £13,000, and as a result the little Abbey was opened on December 27th, 1904.

There had existed an Irish Literary Theatre, under the direction of W. B. Yeats, Edward Martyn, George Moore and others. We must glance back in time for a moment to see how this arose. Two brothers, W. G. and Frank Fay had brought into being what was known as the Ormonde Dramatic Society, which gave performances of farce and melodrama in the Dublin area, using such suburban halls as were available. The Fays had listened to W. B. Yeats's verse play, *The Countess Cathleen* (which had been written in 1895), when it was played by a London cast under the auspices of the Irish Literary Theatre, whose purpose was to perform in Dublin Irish plays by Irish writers. The Fay brothers felt rightly that such plays called for a native cast. Subsequently Frank Fay met W. B. Yeats, who persuaded a gifted Irishwoman, Maud Gonne, to play the lead in his one-act play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. The outcome was that, on the evening of April 2nd, 1902, the Irish Players came into being, in the hall of St. Teresa's Total Abstinence Association (note the name!) in Clarendon Street, Dublin. Maud Gonne dominated and enthralled the Irish audience. Was she not, in the words of





104. VANESSA LEE and IVOR NOVELLO in *King's Rhapsody* (Palace, 1949)



105. REX HARRISON and MARGARET LEIGHTON in *The Cocktail Party* (T. S. Eliot). Produced at the Edinburgh Festival in 1949, this play had its first London production at the New Theatre in 1950.



106. DIANA WYNYARD and JOHN GIELGUD in *Much Ado about Nothing*, produced at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1950, and at the Phœnix Theatre in 1952

Yeats, "a divine being fallen into our mortal infirmity." With Yeats as president, the company went on as the Irish National Theatre Society, and in the following year they were seen in London, at Queen's Gate Hall in South Kensington. The critics realised that a new force had arrived. They noticed that one praiseworthy feature in the acting was the absence of excessive gesticulation, observing the art of the players in keeping still when not speaking. Yeats had a theory that speech was more important than movement, and once proposed a scheme for rehearsing players in tubs ! Simplicity was the aim, in acting and decor, and the effect achieved was one of impressive power and beauty.

Such native talent needed its own theatre, and it was due to Miss Horniman that the need was met, and the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, became the centre of one of the most remarkable groups in the modern theatre, in which there was a striking combination of talent in both players and writers.

Foremost among the writers was W. B. Yeats himself. There was magic in his verse, and while England was still awaiting a recovery of poetic drama its promise came from Ireland. The reader of Yeats will recall sentences that gleam like jewels, reflecting delicate images, and which, when spoken in the native brogue, are invested with music that enchantsthe ear. Metaphors of sheer inspiration spring from the page, and fall like gems from the lips of the player. "The years like great black oxen." The Old Woman, who was Ireland, and who, as she walked down the path, became "a young girl and she had the walk of a queen." Christopher Fry had not yet arrived but Yeats gave promise of what poetry could be on the stage when it was the gift of a master.

The Irish theatre thus was not left lacking the magic of words, linked with the power to reveal the rich depths of character and the significance of events in the lives of ordinary folk. With a prose that hovers constantly and naturally on the border of the poetic, John Millington Synge revealed his genius as one of the greatest of modern playwrights. He was twenty-eight when Yeats met him in Paris, and one may infer that this meeting, and the influence of Yeats, opened up for Synge the magic to be found in the lonely spots of the Aran islands in Galway Bay. Only twelve years later Synge was dead. But he left five plays which will remain immortal. In one brief work, *Riders to the Sea*, he gave evidence of his supreme ability to express the tragic. None can ever forget the cry of the mother, who, already deprived of five sons by the relentless sea, was to lose the only one left in the same manner, and then comes her slowly

spoken reflection, "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me." Here, undoubtedly, is Synge's masterpiece, but closely followed in genius by a comedy, proving the author's flexible command of theme. *The Playboy of the Western World* has revealed to thousands of playgoers the greatness of its author. Who can forget the words in the famous love scene in the third act :

"If the mitred bishops seen you that time, they'd be the like of the holy prophets, I'm thinking, do be straining the bars of Paradise to lay eyes on the Lady Helen of Troy, and she abroad, pacing back and forward, with a nosegay in her golden shawl."

Yet with this masterpiece it looked at first as though the prophet would be without honour in his own country. On the first night there were hisses, and on the second an uproar. Some of the Dublin folk held that Synge had defamed his country in his frank portrayal of the peasant character. But later reflection brought home the truth that he had revealed it with humour, understanding, and pathos. One wonders if Shakespeare met with a like resentment, at first, when he presented some of his rustics?

Now we must move forward a few years to meet, in the middle of the twenties, another Irish playwright, who was to reveal his genius for expressing native character, allied with a gift of searching satire in relation to the life of his time. In all the romance of the theatre there could be no more romantic story than that of this playwright, Sean O'Casey. Those who have delighted in the author's *Juno and the Paycock*, may pause to remember that Juno was a portrayal of his own mother. His father died when Sean was three, and the poor widow was left to bring up the family. The boy knew something akin to starvation, and did not learn to read until he was fourteen. His first book was a Shakespeare, and while he worked as a Dublin navvy he read widely. This man was to reveal his sensitive spirit and glowing imagination in plays reflecting his reaction to the grim events in the recent history of his own nation, and to the tragic horrors of a war-infested world. He had the native endowments of humour and pathos. *Juno and the Paycock* was first produced at the Abbey, Dublin, in 1924. The scene is a Dublin tenement during the troubled period of 1922. The first London performances produced an impression which has not been forgotten. When the next play, *The Plough and the Stars*, was staged at the Abbey, there was an ovation on the first night, but on the second signs of trouble were noticed, and the following night stink-bombs were thrown. On the fifth appearance the play was

greeted with a free fight. This was the signal for the appearance of W. B. Yeats, and the sight of him produced calm. Then he gave his rebuke to the disturbers. "Is this going to be a recurring celebration of Irish genius?" he enquired. "Synge first and then O'Casey. From such a scene in this theatre went forth the fame of Synge. Equally the fame of O'Casey is born here to-night."

Even the enlightened Abbey could make a mistake, for another of O'Casey's plays, and in some features the most remarkable, *The Silver Tassie*, was refused production there. It was left to a great English producer, C. B. Cochran, with characteristic courage and insight, to bring this play to London audiences at the Apollo Theatre in 1929. This event influenced O'Casey to leave Dublin and settle in London. It is a play which presents the naked horror of war, and the pathetic illusion of humanity's faith in it, with a realism that makes an uncompromising impact. Those who saw it at the Apollo must vividly recall Charles Laughton (a great actor lost to the screen) as Heegan, the Dublin footballer, and a setting by Augustus John for the symbolic second act. Audiences were hushed to stillness as they watched the grim satire and reproach of that searching symbolism. They saw the jagged and broken outline of the ruined monastery, and the shadow of a great howitzer over all. Set against this scene the crowd of soldiers and their corporal chanting an invocation to the gun :

" Let us honour that in which we do put our trust,  
That it may not fail us in our time of need."

The soldiers assemble around the gun, each falling on one knee in a gesture of homage :

" Hail cool-hardened tower of steel emboss'd  
With the fever'd, figment thoughts of man ;  
Guardian of our love and hate and fear,  
Speak for us to the inner ear of God,  
We believe in God and we believe in thee.  
Dreams of line, of colour and of form ;  
Dreams of music dead forever now ;  
Dreams of bronze and dreams in stone have gone  
To make thee delicate and strong to kill,  
We believe in God and we believe in thee."

In the final act was shown the lusty Dublin footballer, Heegan, now a broken wreck of war, paralysed and in hospital, clinging feebly to life, and Laughton gave a superb performance in portraying this tragedy, as did Beatrix Lehmann as the fervent Susie Mouran.

O'Casey ventured another rich experiment in the symbolic when he wrote *Within the Gates* shortly before the Second World War.

Here, then, were examples of what the new Irish drama had to offer the English stage. It made a substantial contribution to the deepening and development of the modern theatre as a medium not merely of social entertainment, but for the criticism and interpretation of life, the portrayal of humanity, and the humour, pathos and beauty lurking in common things.

From Ireland we must travel back to the English provinces. Here the impulse is to make Stratford-upon-Avon the first visit, but the remarkable developments there call for particular mention later. First it is important to take a brief glimpse at activities, important for the English theatre, which were taking shape in various other centres. Foremost of these was the further work done by Miss Horniman<sup>1</sup> who had taken a theatre of her own in Manchester, where she inaugurated the now extensive and vital repertory movement (a name that came to stay, although she disliked it and never used it), first at the Midland Theatre, and then after a year, at the Manchester Gaiety, where Iden Payne was engaged as producer.

It was a derelict building when Miss Horniman took over in 1908. Yet the following years were to see scores of plays presented there, many being by new dramatists. It was her aim to welcome and encourage the new writers if they really had something worth while to offer. Four names at once stand out as belonging to the Manchester group; Stanley Houghton, Harold Brighouse, Charles McEvoy, and Allan Monkhouse, all of whom made welcome contributions to the English theatre. The established writers were not forgotten, and there were good revivals of Shaw, Hankin, Granville-Barker, Galsworthy and Masefield, while, as we look back on the names of some of the company, our eye is arrested by those of Sybil Thorndike, Lewis Casson, Herbert Lomas, and others who were to make their mark in London. There was certainly no lack of quality in Manchester.

Further North, a year later, the Scottish Repertory Theatre which, opened in Glasgow under Alfred Waring, was primarily a national movement designed to make Scotland independent of London for good drama. In four seasons there were nearly fifty plays, about one-third of which were new. Some excellent work was done, and special mention should be made of the production in Glasgow, in November, 1909, of Anton Tchekov's *The Seagull*.

<sup>1</sup>See *Miss Horniman and the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester* by Rex Pogson (Rockliff) 1952

This was the first time Tchekov had been produced in Britain, and Scotland must remain proud of this fact. Discerning eyes had rightly measured the greatness of the Russian playwright, and Scotland took the step of introduction for which England was not yet ready.

The tragic interruption of the First World War brought changes to both these ventures. By the end of the conflict Manchester had ceased to have its repertory theatre, and the Glasgow enterprise had run its course. But two other important Repertory Theatres had arisen, those of Liverpool and Birmingham. The lead in Liverpool was taken by Basil Dean and his partner, Alec Rea, a local ship-broker, who became chairman of the Liverpool Repertory Theatre. The first production was Barrie's, *The Admirable Crichton*, on November 11th, 1911, directed by Basil Dean, who was a member of Miss Horniman's Company in Manchester. Progress was not rapid, but the venture made solid headway, and more than one young player found there the beginning of the road to fame. Among these were Robert Donat, Diana Wynyard, Rex Harrison, Michael Redgrave, Robert Speaight, Herbert Lomas, Marjorie Fielding, and Cecil Parker.

Birmingham was to achieve distinction in the repertory movement through the inspiration of a tireless enthusiast, Barry Vincent Jackson (later Sir Barry). His love for the theatre was inherited, for had not his father given him the name of Barry in admiration of the actor, Barry Sullivan? In 1907 Barry Jackson had met John Drinkwater, then a clerk in a local insurance office. Together they formed an amateur society known as the Pilgrim Players, whose success with *Abraham Lincoln* enabled Drinkwater to embark on the literary career to which he aspired. From this modest enterprise came the plan for the Birmingham Repertory, which was launched in the spring of 1913 with a performance of *Twelfth Night*, in which Drinkwater was cast as Malvolio. Before the curtain, Barry Jackson spoke lines which had been written by Drinkwater "For the Opening of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre" concluding with the fervent lines :

" May you that watch and we that serve so grow  
In wisdom as adventuring we go  
That some unwavering light from us may shine,  
We have the challenge of the mighty line—  
God grant us grace to give the countersign."

The theatre inaugurated in this spirit has abundantly justified the expectations with which it began. It has given a tremendous

lead to the whole repertory movement. The list of plays which have been presented on the Birmingham stage makes good reading. It reflects the best our theatre can offer. Sir Barry Jackson used his wealth and experience as a business man in unstinting and devoted service to the English theatre, his generosity and courage astonishing even the imperturbable Shaw. When the Birmingham Repertory agreed to stage the five parts of *Back to Methuselah*, Shaw exclaimed anxiously, "Jackson, are you certain your wife and children are insured?" Even during the period of the First World War when the London stage was in a condition of much confusion and uncertainty, Birmingham went steadily on its way, and there was no lowering in the standard of its offerings. They included the works of Shaw, Masefield, Synge, Hankin, Drinkwater, Arnold Bennett, Pinero, and others of similar calibre, with a generous measure of Shakespeare. A vindication truly of the enterprise and vision with which the movement began, and an inspiring chapter in the Romance of the English Theatre.

Nothing is surer evidence of the vitality of British drama than the steady development of the repertory movement, in its widest sense; ever expanding and throwing out new shoots of life in the face of many difficulties and obstacles. Of the eighty or more companies which now exist, not all, of course can claim the quality shewn at Birmingham and Liverpool, but there are fine records at the Citizen's Theatre, Glasgow, Dundee, Northampton, Windsor and others. One cannot estimate too highly the work they are doing in satisfying the genuine demand for worthy drama that is to be found throughout the provinces, and which the cinema has quite failed to meet. To quote from a recent article in *The Times*.

The invention of talking films had a bad effect on the provincial repertory theatres during the late 1920s, but to-day they have so much revived that their work is of greater importance in the country's theatrical life than it ever was before. Moreover, they are of great value to the London stage since the provincial repertory theatres provide the young actor with vital training and experience.

One of the finest centres of drama in the provinces is the Theatre Royal, Bristol, home of the Bristol Old Vic. This beautiful 18th century playhouse, which has been mentioned before in these pages, was rescued from certain destruction by the action of the Arts Council (then C.E.M.A.), who bought the building in 1942, and by the public spirit of certain of the citizens of Bristol, and became the first State-subsidised theatre in the country. There, in productions of both Shakespeare and modern plays which are outstanding,

young actors and actresses are making their names, proving themselves, under the able direction of such producers as Hugh Hunt and Denis Carey, in every way worthy of the name Old Vic.

There must also be recognition of the work of the Amateur Dramatic Movement, and of the British Drama League, which was founded by Geoffrey Whitworth in 1919. The annual competitive festival of the League is now the occasion of the keenest interest and rivalry among amateur societies. Amateur players now approximate to at least one hundred thousand, and the B.D.L. does a splendid work in fostering their interests with its schools for players and producers, where many internationally famous professional producers have been the lecturers.

The Amateur Movement itself is widely varied, from the more humble society which hires a modest hall for performances, to the highly developed organisation like the Bradford Civic Playhouse and the Maddermarket Theatre, Norwich. The latter certainly merits a special mention. The company was founded in 1911 by a group of enthusiastic amateurs with total resources of only £12. Under the guidance of Nugent Monck, the only one among them with professional acting experience (he had also once been stage manager at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin), they began by presenting a series of nativity plays. Soon a hall was acquired in ~~Norwich~~, and so successful financially was their work that ultimately they felt justified in buying and converting an old Georgian building with a gallery, where an Elizabethan stage was installed. The cost was £3,300, and Nugent Monck was not daunted that it took seven years to free the new, Maddermarket, Theatre from debt. All of Shakespeare's plays have been produced, and Shaw, Tchekov and Euripides are also popular with Norwich audiences.

Nugent Monck himself has emerged as one of our finest producers, and there is significance in the fact that the players at the Maddermarket are anonymous—their names do not appear on the programmes.

In recent years a further powerful influence has been the work of the Arts Council, which, by means of special tours has brought the drama to localities where no theatre was available. The interest and response of men and women in remote and scattered areas is a very inspiring and relevant aspect of the development of the English Theatre. We may note with gratitude the heartening witness of so competent a critic as Mr. J. C. Trewin :

I remember invigorating nights at a *Cast* in a miners' hall of County Durham among the silhouetted slag-heaps; a production of Miles

Malleson's version of *L'Avare* on an out-of-season January night in a seaside theatre at the Yorkshire town of Whitby, a *Taming of the Shrew* in the long ribbon of a market-hall at Newbury in Berkshire, another Molière version in the hall of a factory at the East Anglian town of Chelmsford. Enthusiasm everywhere; unrestrained pleasure; the kind of reception that heartens the players and makes the playgoer glad to be in a theatre. (Drama 1945-1950, p. 41).

### FESTIVALS

The vital activities manifest in the provincial theatres include above all else the now internationally famous Festivals, of which Stratford-upon-Avon is first and foremost. Here the background is Bensonian, for Sir Frank Benson organised annual Shakespearian Festivals in this town for twenty-six years, and in the world theatrical Stratford-upon-Avon will be linked with Benson as surely as it is with Shakespeare.

The original building was destroyed by fire in 1926. It had been opened in 1879 with *Much Ado About Nothing*, thanks to the generosity of a Stratford citizen, Charles Flower. For years he had to contend with the apathy of the local population, and the attacks of the London critics. The general attitude in London at the time may be summed up in the words of a writer in one of the national newspapers, "To my mind the whole business of the Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon is a solemn farce calculated to puff up a few local nobodies with a mistaken idea of their own importance."

Early in the Edwardian period the Stratford Festival was limited to two or three weeks, linked with the period of Shakespeare's birthday. W. B. Yeats paid his tribute to Stratford in the spring of 1901. "There is no one who has come merely because one must go somewhere after dinner. All day one does not hear or see an incongruous thing . . . one need talk of nothing but the play in the inn parlour, under oak beams blackened by time, and showing the mark of the axe that shaped them." Critical opinion had, indeed, changed! The famous of the day felt it their privilege to yield their tribute. There Ellen Terry scored a triumph as Henry's Katherine. There Tree replied to the toast of "The Drama" at a public luncheon in the Town Hall. Irving was to have opened the Festival in 1905 with his matchless impersonation of Shylock, but for him it was too late, for death had claimed him.

The first Great War broke the continuity of the Festivals, and there was a gap from 1916 to 1919. In the latter year reorganisation took place but Benson decided he could no longer continue his



107. MARGARET RUTHERFORD and PAUL SCHOFIELD in a scene from *Ring Round the Moon*, Christopher Fry's translation of a play by Anouilh, produced by Peter Brook (Globe, 1950)



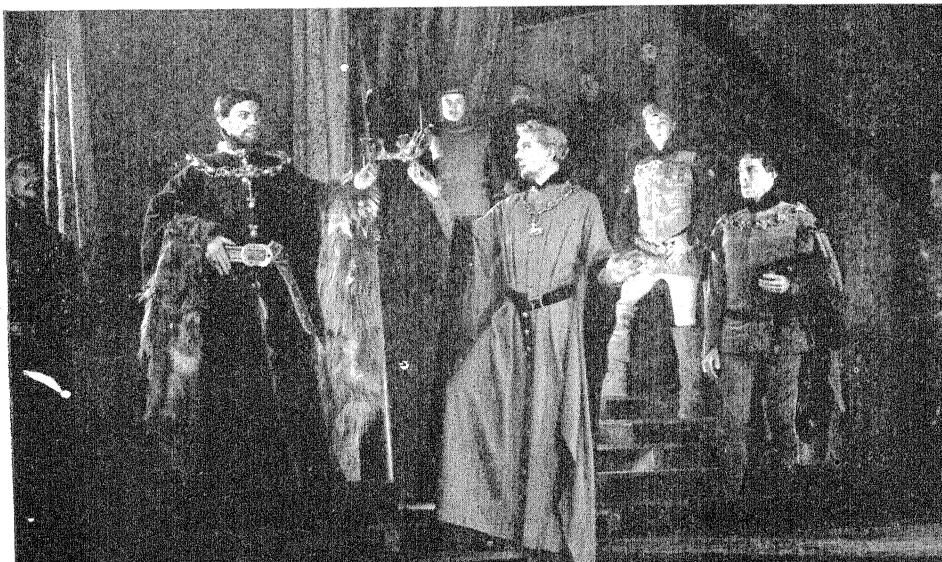
108. CYRIL RAYMOND, NAN MUNRO, SYBIL THORNDIKE, KATHLEEN HARRISON, EDITH EVANS, PATRICIA McCARRON and HAROLD SCOTT in *Waters of the*



109. LAURENCE OLIVIER and VIVIEN LEIGH in *Antony and Cleopatra* (St. James's, 1951)



110. VIVIEN LEIGH in *Antony and Cleopatra* (St. James's, 1951)



111. HARRY ANDREWS and MICHAEL REDGRAVE in *Richard II* at the



112. PETER USTINOV (right) as the mysterious stranger in his own play, *The Love of Four Colonels* (Wyndham's, 1951). The four Colonels, L. to R., are ALAN GIFFORD, COLIN GORDON, THEODORE BIKEL and EUGENE DECKERS



(Above)

113. A scene from *Coriolanus* at the Stratford Festival, 1952 with MARY ELLIS, centre, and ANTHONY QUAYLE, right



(Right)

114. MARGOT FONTEYN and MICHAEL SOMES in *Daphnis and Chloë*, first performed by the Sadler's Wells Ballet at Covent Garden in 1951. Choreo-

work at Stratford. Later the Governors of the Memorial Theatre took over the Stratford-upon-Avon Festival Company, becoming one of the earliest non-profit making managements in the country. Any surplus on the Festivals went back into the theatre.

After the destruction of the original building by fire in 1926 the Festivals continued, but were handicapped by the limited nature of the only accommodation available, a local cinema which provided a narrow, cramped stage.

An appeal was made to the entire English-speaking world for funds to build and endow a new theatre, and in open competition designs for the new building were invited from architects in Great Britain, Canada and the United States. Entries were to be submitted anonymously, so that when the final choice was unanimously made it was not known at first who was the successful competitor. It proved to be Elizabeth Scott, a woman of twenty-nine, daughter of a Bournemouth doctor. Her great-uncle was the famous architect, Sir Gilbert Scott.

The new theatre, often condemned for its exterior, but a magnificent playhouse within, was opened on Shakespeare's birthday, April 23rd, in 1932, by H.R.H. The Prince of Wales, and the first Festival play to be staged there was *King Henry IV* (Parts I and II).

But as time went on Stratford was increasingly criticised for its parochial outlook and the poor quality of many of the productions. Most happily the Festival received a marked impetus and a new international emphasis when Sir Barry Jackson became Director in 1946, and this progress has been continued under his successor, the young actor-producer, Anthony Quayle. In 1950 the cast was led by John Gielgud. A peak of achievement has now been reached where the Festival has indeed become world famous, and justly so. In recent years tours to the Antipodes have been undertaken, emulating the Old Vic Company. Sir Frank Benson would surely feel that his early devotion to Stratford-upon-Avon had been abundantly rewarded, particularly if he could have experienced the brilliant cycle of historical plays in 1951, Stratford's unforgettable contribution to the Festival of Britain.

In 1952 the formation of a second company is announced, and an extension of the scheme whereby Stratford productions are brought to London—so brilliantly inaugurated with John Gielgud's *Much Ado About Nothing*.

From Stratford it is an easy journey to Malvern, circled by hills famous for the spacious views they afford. Here from Shakespeare

we come to Shaw, and once more to the creative genius of Sir Barry Jackson, who has his own country home nearby. To Malvern, in the glorious summer of 1929 he brought some of the company and staff from the Birmingham Repertory Theatre to give the first English performance of Bernard Shaw's *The Apple Cart*, the original production having taken place at a theatre in Warsaw. Here indeed, was something new in the sedate life of Malvern. The hotels were soon filled with visitors, and the London critics flocked to the event.

Best of all the author was to be found there in person. It was possible for the many worshippers to gaze with their own eyes on their dramatic deity. It might be as he sat in the seat of his choice in the front row of the dress circle ; or busy with the camera (G.B.S. was an enthusiastic amateur photographer), although it was not usual for him to get more than ten successes out of fifty exposures. Again, he might be met, this agile octogenerian, as he then was, walking up the lofty Beacon, having told the local Council that they should build a funicular railway from the centre of the town to the top, " for the benefit of people too old for the donkeys."

But Malvern was not entirely limited to Shaw. Later came the first production of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, destined to have a successful London run, and there was also a sequence of drama from the Elizabethans to James Bridie. But ever and always Malvern was Shaw's land, and Barry Jackson could not have realised that the venerable G.B.S. who was seventy-three when the first Festival was held, would be able to offer a new play twenty years later. The middle of this period of two decades, 1939, gave Malvern the opportunity to present the creation of Shaw's eighty-third birthday, *In Good King Charles's Golden Days*, a capital piece of work that would certainly justify a revival. Then, ten years later, in the summer of 1949, Roy Limbert, who had been Barry Jackson's partner in the Malvern Festival, organised the first Festival there for ten years. Again the amazing Shaw, a man born four years before Anton Tchekov, was ready with an offering. This time it was *Buoyant Billions*, a work not without merit, although some critics were disparaging. The Malvern of that year was Shaw's Festival. The other productions did not make the same appeal, and only served to show how closely Shaw and Malvern were linked together. Thus the Malvern Festival, whose discontinuance is much regretted, made a real contribution to the development of the English theatre.

Still travelling west, we cannot overlook historic Bath. The

Bath Assembly, now an annual event, is enhanced by the charm and dignity of this lovely Roman and Regency city. The Festival here has not, so far, offered much new work, but, as one critic has aptly said, "it is a period piece for period pieces."

We have recognised the contribution made to the English Theatre by the Irish drama, and must therefore not ignore the significance of the great Festival which now takes place in the Scottish capital, and which has become an international event. Here, again, the setting is ideal, in a city eloquent of a vividly romantic past. The fare provided by the Edinburgh Festival is not, it is true, mainly dramatic. Music occupies a prominent place, but there is a serious proportion of significant drama. Here, for instance, one saw the Hamlet of the distinguished French actor, Jean-Louis Barrault,<sup>1</sup> and none who saw it will forget Tyrone Guthrie's staging of the old Scottish morality, *The Three Estates*, set on the bannered, platform stage, in a hall the dignity and austerity of which enhanced the effect of the whole production. It is legitimate, and in fact necessary, to include this great Festival in any story of the Romance of the English Theatre, for not only is the event truly international in character, but it was the occasion for the original production, for instance, of T. S. Eliot's, *The Cocktail Party*, which subsequently proved a popular success in London and New York. Festival audiences have also had the pleasure of seeing leading English players such as John Gielgud, among many others.

Above all, it is an indication of the expansion and progress of the theatre and the arts which should check any pessimism as to their vitality and future, and also a tribute to indomitable courage, for the first Festival opened in a world disrupted and utterly impoverished by war.

<sup>1</sup>See *Reflections on the Theatre* by Jean-Louis Barrault (Rockliff) 1951.

## Chapter XIII

### BETWEEN THE WARS

WE have surveyed in the previous chapter some features of the provincial awakening, and now we return to London. In the Metropolis the years which followed immediately after the first World War were years of discovery and recovery. The atmosphere of uncertainty and confusion that marked the war period still prevailed for a while, but signs of recovery were quick to appear.

One of the early phenomena of the period was *Heartbreak House*, which Bernard Shaw had created during the war years and which appeared at the Court Theatre in 1921. It is interesting to mark how G.B.S., granted creative energy until a ripe old age, links the decades of the modern English theatre, and becomes an almost constant background against which we watch the coming and going of lesser men. In *Heartbreak House* it was clear that Shaw had reflected deeply on some of the lessons of the war. It was a pointed demand for conscious control and direction, and a plea that the supreme task of the Englishman was 'Navigation'. "Learn it and live, or leave it and be damned." Here was Shaw at his best, full of searching challenge and analysis, prophetic insight, and with a very sure sense of what really matters in life. It was not only a fine artistic creation, but a timely tract for the post-war generation. It spoke to their condition. It was a period of discontent and much bewilderment, much of this spirit being expressed in mere negative and destructive protest against things as they were. *Heartbreak House* had an accent that was needed. Then, a few years later, came the massive Shawian Pentateuch, *Back to Methuselah*. This was an astonishing achievement, brought from Birmingham by Barry Jackson, who had staged it there in the autumn of 1923, and who now, at the Court again, gave it to a London audience. Sir Cedric Hardwicke has told how when it was advertised in Birmingham as the Shaw Cycle, one old lady complained bitterly at the box office that a variety bill was being presented, adding that she hated acrobatics of any kind, and trick cyclists in particular !

In this colossal work Shaw once again revealed his qualities as a

prophet. Again it is the forward look, the gesture of hope, outlasting all the follies and stupidities of humanity. "Of Life there is no end. It is enough that there is a beyond." The play served, also, to make clear the quality latent in some of the players of the time. Under H. K. Ayliff's direction the cast included Edith Evans, Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies, Cedric Hardwicke, Colin Keith-Johnston and Scott Sunderland. This was a fair promise of what the Interim Peace years (as we may call them) would be able to offer. Then, if any were disposed to think that Shaw had exhausted his amazing powers for a while, they were checked at once by the appearance in the same year (1924) at the New Theatre, of *Saint Joan*, which had already won fame in America, and in which Sybil Thorndike gave the greatest performance so far in her career. After this there was to be no further Shawian play for six years until, as we have seen, *The Apple Cart* made a joyous Festival for visitors to Malvern. Here, again, there was point and purpose in the comedy, which was a criticism of democracy, the logic of which we can appreciate anew in the political dilemmas of our own day.

Altogether Shaw was easily master of the English stage in the years that followed the first World War. In those years most Edwardian plays seemed only period pieces. Not so Shaw: his was an authentic voice for the times, and audiences were quick to feel this and respond.

There was another of the Edwardians, who, if less prolific and versatile than Shaw, yet had a message for the changing society of the post-war England: John Galsworthy who gave the English stage some of his best work at this time. In *The Skin Game*, and in *Loyalties*, he mirrored the problems and changes that were becoming familiar in the new England. In *The Forest*; *Escape*; *Windows*, and his last play, *The Roof*, Galsworthy gave the post-war decade thought-provoking themes and helped to redeem the stage from other material which was shoddy and trivial. One may safely predict a Galsworthy revival. Television is, perhaps in this instance, in anticipation of the stage.

An increasing number of playwrights made their offering to the English theatre during these years between the wars. Of these space will allow mention only of those whose influence was destined to be enduring. One of the foremost names in this group is that of Somerset Maugham. America had already given him a welcome with the production of *Our Betters* in New York, which was also a noteworthy success when brought to London. There was a smart, metallic glitter in the work congenial to the mood of the

time, but which to-day no doubt would render it dated. Maugham was, however, the creator of more permanent material, the evidence of which he gave in *The Circle*, a masterly study in character, and an occasion for the expression of some keen insight and worldly wisdom. He quickly proved himself an accomplished craftsman, with a sure sense of what the stage demanded, and an accurate idea of the psychological climate of the new generation. Maugham belongs to the group of writers equally at home with the novel or the play. Some of his stories made excellent drama, as we can judge from such productions as *The Moon and Sixpence*, and the South Seas drama, *Rain*. He could be ruthlessly satirical, as can be seen from *Home and Beauty*, and daringly original in approach, as in *The Breadwinner*, the story of the husband and father who is in revolt against the selfishness of his family. Maugham's epigrams can flash like fireworks, and few can hold the mirror reflecting modern life with greater skill. He is an example of another successful writer recruited from the medical profession, which has given not a few celebrities to the world of letters, including Conan Doyle, A. J. Cronin, and James Bridie, to mention only three.

Of another modern playwright, Maugham wrote these words : " He knocked at the door with impatient knuckles, and then he rattled the handle, and then he burst in. After a moment's stupor the older playwrights welcomed him affably enough, and retired with what dignity they could muster to the shelf which with a sprightly gesture he indicated to them as their proper place " In these words he was speaking of Noel Coward, who was another of the major influences in the English theatre of the period between the wars. When time brings a true assessment of the work in the English Theatre of these two decades of uneasy peace, it will be realised how essentially Coward was a child of his generation. Some details of his career bear witness. Born in 1899 his stage work began when he saw a request for a boy actor to appear in a play for children at the Little Theatre. After an audition he had his first contract, the part of a prince, in a production called *The Goldfish*. Later he was one of Italia Conti's children in *Where the Rainbow Ends*, and wrote his first play when a young man of twenty-one. It had small success, but within three years came *The Vortex* (revived in 1952), for which the little Everyman Theatre at Hampstead provided the stage, and with this work both the theatre and the writer became news. The enterprising Hampstead theatre was filled to capacity. *The Vortex* soon became a West End triumph, and it was clear the young playwright had arrived. Later came *Fallen Angels* (the titles

are suggestive) then *Hay Fever*; *Easy Virtue*, and a cluster of minor things. This new writer was prolific. The Coward characteristics were not well established, and tended to have imitators. The writing was abbreviated, smart, cynical, witty, at times a little inane, yet with a play of wit revealing the characters as essentially people of their time. One feels that an historian of the future, seeking examples of the Bright Young Things of the 1920's, will cite the personalities set out in the earlier Coward plays as truly typical of their time.

If Maugham and Coward, were the new masters of comedy, whose appeal would continue for decades, other able, if lesser, writers left a mark in the same field. Frederick Lonsdale revealed a sharp, pungent satire, and metallic brilliance resembling the other dramatists. His particular skill is seen at its best in *The Last of Mrs. Cheyney*, which had a long run at St. James's, enhanced by the superb acting of Gladys Cooper and Gerald du Maurier, as well as Ronald Squire, who could always be trusted to bring out the best in a Lonsdale play. A. A. Milne, in more gentle and urbane manner, provided another easy style of comedy at the beginning of the first post-war decade, in *Mr. Pim Passes By*, fortunate, also, in having such talent as Irene Vanbrugh in the part of Olivia, and Dion Boucicault, who was well cast as Mr. Pim. Milne contributed something of the Barrie element to the drama, but with sentiment more restrained and controlled. In this first post-war decade he produced more than a dozen plays, and kept in prominence a kindly and genial atmosphere which was a corrective to the sharp and rather acidulated temper of the clever, but occasionally rather bleak, comedies that were much in vogue.

As one scans the programmes of the period the names of other competent writers will be recalled. C. K. Munro, a Civil Servant who adopted this name for literary use, was the author of comedies which proved popular, best known of which was *At Mrs. Beams*, with its satirical picture of the occupants of a Notting Hill Gate boarding house. Munro could create characters which stuck in the memory, and when Jean Cadell played the part of Miss Shoe, with her almost ceaseless dribble of inane and rambling conversation, this was a performance to bring back a smile long after. Munro, like Coward, owed something to the adventurous little playhouse at Hampstead, for his most popular comedy was staged there before coming to the West End for a successful run in 1923. This was a further reminder of the good work which was beginning and would continue to arrive, from the small experimental theatres, to whose enterprise the West End owes a number of successes.

St. John Ervine was adding to his reputation by expressing his skill not only as a writer of more serious drama, but as the author of very effective comedies. *The Lady of Belmont* caught the public fancy, and his greatest success came in 1929 with *The First Mrs. Fraser*, in which Marie Tempest and Henry Ainley appeared for eighteen months at the Haymarket.

An interesting feature in the record of playwrights is that not a few owe their distinction and place to one outstanding production. While they may be the authors of other plays, yet it is by one only that they sprang into prominence, and keep a place in theatrical history. Several examples of this fact belong to the first post-war period. The distinguished critic, William Archer, a serious Scot, and champion of Ibsen, surprised his theatrical friends when he wrote a popular melodrama, *The Green Goddess*. Its construction was skilful and adroit, with vivid incident, convincing characters, and swift, sustained movement, combined with clever suspense. This was certainly what we should call "good theatre," although not of the type expected from Archer. Another name in this category is that of R. C. Sherriff, who, like Drinkwater, was a young insurance official. It was not until 1929 (after numerous managements had turned it down) that his memorable play *Journey's End*, began its West End career of 594 performances and captured the public mind with its simple direct presentation of the type of character and experience that many of differing degrees had met in the trenches. Sherriff wrote other plays, but his reputation endures as the author of *Journey's End*, and a revival in 1950 served to show that this remarkable war play can still make an appeal.

Possibly one of the most noteworthy examples of a reputation created by a single play was that of Sutton Vane with *Outward Bound*, which struck with surprise both audience and critics when (again to that theatre's credit) it was staged at the Everyman Theatre in 1923.

Sutton Vane helped to show that audiences would be responsive to an exploration of deep problems, if given the right dramatic treatment. *Outward Bound*, as many will remember, was a leap into the mysterious region that lies beyond death. It was a theme to be the substance later of one of Mr. J. B. Priestley's best plays, *Johnson Over Jordan*, which for some strange reason did not secure the popular response given to Sutton Vane's version of a similar theme.

If comedy was the playgoer's taste we have already mentioned some of the opportunities for gratifying his need. There were others, too, not forgetting one or two neat comedies by H. F.



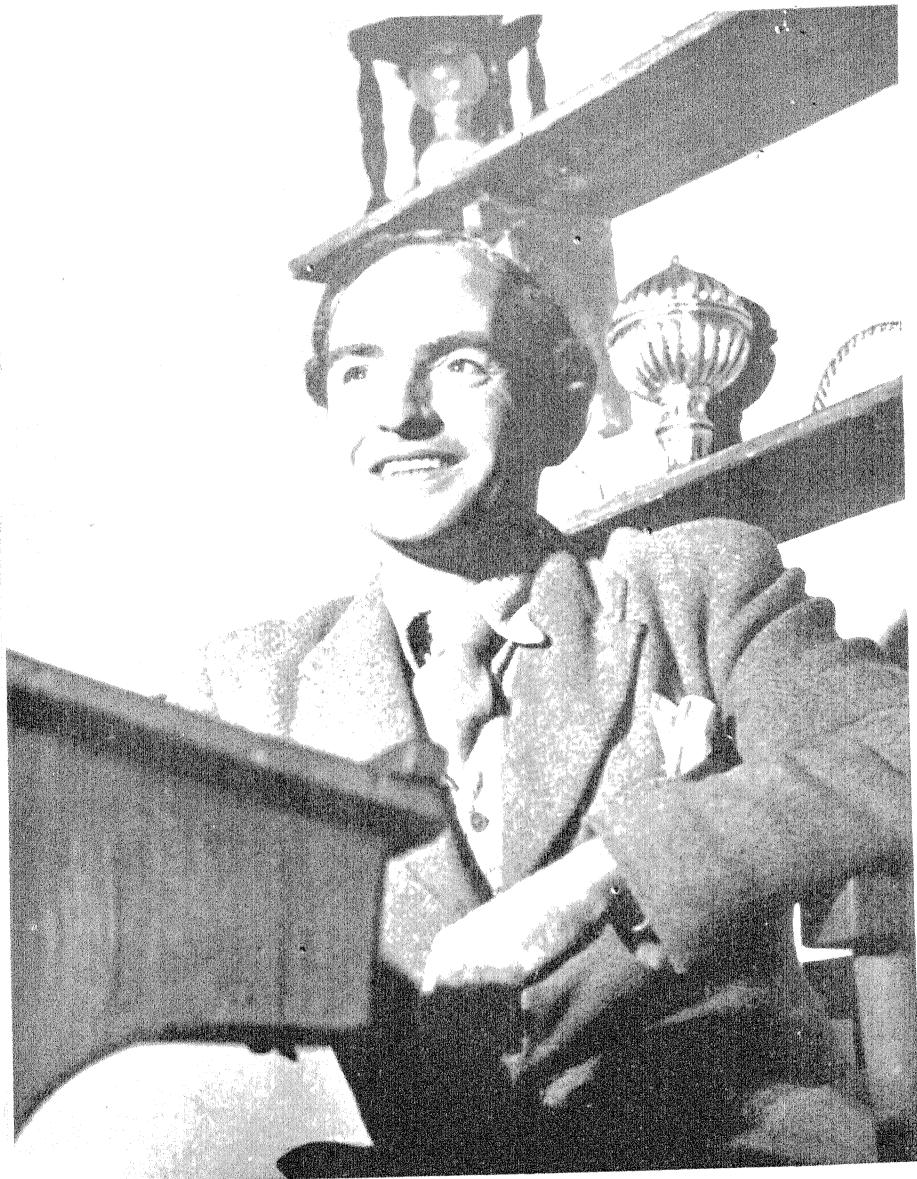
115. (Left) PEGGY ASHCROFT (centre) in *The Deep Blue Sea* by Terence Rattigan (Duchess, 1952)



116. (Right) ALEC GUINNESS and DIANA



117. MARGOT FONTEYN in *Les Sylphides*



118. CHRISTOPHER FRY



Maltby, who could be relied upon to provide an enjoyable evening, as could Alfred Sutro, who in *The Laughing Lady*, demonstrated that he could produce a laughing audience. Some will still remember the excellent work of Charles Laughton in putting well in the front Arnold Bennett's comedy of *Mr. Proback*, while a real breeze from the moors of Devon came with *The Farmer's Wife*, which enjoyed over thirteen hundred performances at the Court, and put Eden Phillpotts well in the limelight as a writer of popular comedies. This was confirmed by another long run for *Yellow Sands*, under another management at the Haymarket. In both Cedric Hardwicke helped in the Phillpotts victory, and added much to his own reputation. The native Devon rustic could have found no better interpreter.

Ivor Novello, great man of the theatre—actor, manager, dramatic author and composer, was undoubtedly one of the most versatile theatrical figures of our generation. He made his first stage appearance in 1921, but was already well-known as the composer of the first-war popular song, "Keep the Home Fires Burning." Many of his appearances as actor were in plays written by himself, including *The Truth Game* (1928); *A Symphony in Two Flats* (1929); *I Lived with You* (1932); *Fresh Fields* (1933); *Proscenium* (1933); *Full House* (1935) and *Comedienne* (1938). In 1938 he scored a big success in the title role of *Henry V*, for which he had written the incidental music.

His greatest contribution to the English theatre, however, was the series of spectacular musicals launched at Drury Lane with *Glamorous Night* in 1935. With their tuneful music, romantic stories and lavish production they brought colour to the lives of thousands of theatregoers. *Glamorous Night* was followed by *Careless Rapture* (1936); *Crest of the Wave* (1937); *The Dancing Years* (1939); *Arc de Triomphe* (1943) and *Perchance to Dream* (1945). It was while appearing in his *King's Rhapsody* at the Palace, that Novello died suddenly a few hours after leaving the theatre, on March 6th, 1951. His passing was mourned by countless theatre-lovers throughout the country.

Though so different in style and temperament, there is a similarity between the achievements of Novello and Coward. The latter, like Ivor Novello the author of many plays, was also able to delight with such musicals as *Bitter Sweet* (1929); *Words and Music* (1932); and *Conversation Piece* (1934); while *Cavalcade* (1931) proved how well he was able to work on a big canvas as author and producer.

It is generally agreed that since the last war British musicals have suffered an eclipse in the face of the superior quality of the modern American product. Only Ivor Novello held his unique place in the affections of the public, though one must not forget the success of Sir Charles Cochran's *Bless the Bride*, the work of A. P. Herbert and Vivian Ellis. However, with their slickness, verve and tunefulness, the big American hits like *Oklahoma!*, *Annie Get Your Gun*; *Brigadoon*, *Carousel*; *Kiss Me, Kate*; *South Pacific* and *Call Me Madam* have deserved acclaim for their creators the Rodgers-Hammerstein II team, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, choreographer Agnes de Mille and others.

Prior to 1939, the typical English musical comedy found favour at the Gaiety in the series including *It's a Boy* (recently revived with success as *Blue for a Boy*), *It's a Girl*; *Seeing Stars*, *Going Greek* and *Swing Along*, in which Leslie Henson, Sydney Howard, Fred Emney and Richard Hearne were popular stars. Others well remembered in pre-war musicals and revues are Jack Buchanan, Bobby Howes, Jessie Mathews, Binnie and Sonnie Hale, Cicely Courtneidge and Jack Hulbert, Evelyn Laye, Frances Day, Laddie Cliff, Clifford Mollison and Lupino Lane. Beatrice Lillie, a great revue star, has, like Gertrude Lawrence, achieved a big reputation in America of recent years.

As early as the spring of 1929 a new comedy, *Glamour*, appeared above the name of Emlyn Williams. There was a provincial tour with a brief season on a London stage, but it is unlikely that many realised at the time the latent power in this young writer and actor. Nor possibly a few years later in his thriller about a haunted theatre called *A Murder has been Arranged*. But he scored a big personal success in 1935 as author and actor in his grim murder thriller, *Night Must Fall*, and three years later came *The Corn is Green*, still thought by many to be his finest play and performance.

In addition to his own plays Emlyn Williams gave the theatre in England *The Late Christopher Bean*, from the French of Rene Fauchois, while he helped to enlighten our understanding of Shakespeare's times in *Spring, 1600*.

During the second World War he scored successes with *The Light of Heart* and *The Morning Star*, while of recent date *Accolade*, a strong play with an unusual theme, proved a triumph, as did his own performance as the famous novelist with a split personality.

Then, as an instance of versatility, his impersonation of Charles Dickens in the famous readings, was a dramatic achievement which gave delight to Dickens lovers on both sides of the Atlantic, and

implanted in hundreds of others, one may conjecture, a desire to discover for themselves this great English writer

Looking back again, as we must, to the years that followed the First World War (important because they were more formative for the theatre than we then knew) we should mark well the name of another dramatist of sensitive imagination, with a facility for verbal beauty not too common at the period: Clemence Dane. A former actress writing under this name, she had two plays staged in London in the same year, both of which confirmed her power as a playwright of distinction. Both *Will Shakespeare*, and *A Bill of Divorcement* made a profound impression, and gave convincing proof of the writer's power as a creator of intense situation combined with a mastery of choice and luminous prose. Of the two works, *A Bill of Divorcement* is by far the more widely known, but it may be safe to predict a revival of *Will Shakespeare*, in this Neo-Elizabethan era, worth while for the vivid portrait it presents of the Tudor Queen.

Those who were responsive to grace and charm of style and the spell of poetic speech, found delight in another play of the time which came to the Haymarket in 1925. This was *The Man With a Load of Mischief*, by Ashley Dukes. In addition to this delightful play Ashley Dukes undertook another fine piece of work for the English theatre in founding the now famous Mercury Theatre at Notting Hill. If we may add a third to the elect few who were essentially concerned with beauty in theme and diction we should include Clifford Bax, who demonstrated in *The Venetians*, and *The Rose Without a Thorn*, how sensitive artistry could light up an historical episode, and invest it with a beauty not easily forgotten. The latter play gave an opportunity for a fine performance by Frank Vosper as Henry the Eighth. (The early death of Frank Vosper was a real loss to the English stage). Bax has a poetic gift revealed in his ballad-operas, and in his rich and mature study, *Socrates*. With poetic drama once more coming into favour we should not forget that in the earlier years these were some of the writers preparing the way.

In this category, also, another young poet cannot be forgotten, James Elroy Flecker, for his distinctive work was the only verse drama to achieve West End success for many years. *Hassan* was staged at His Majesty's Theatre in 1923, at a time not hospitable to poetry on the stage. There was incidental music by Delius, and a very effective production by Basil Dean. It was a work sensitively interpreted by an admirable cast, in which outstanding performances were those of Henry Ainley, Basil Gill and Laura Cowie. The

poet's skill was revealed in episodes and scenes of real beauty, perhaps none more impressive than the Beggar's Ballet in the House of the Manichees, when the rags of the beggars, with their varied infirmities, were changed as by magic, and disclosed a scene of the rarest beauty. (The 1951 Festival of Britain revival, was, unhappily, not a success).

Flecker had produced an earlier, and, as some thought, an even better play, in *Don Juan*. It enshrines poetic gems, and would have been the type of work to carry forward the poetic drama intimated in the earlier efforts of Stephen Phillips. But the time was not yet, and only now, in the fifties, are we beginning to discern some of the rich possibilities of verse drama. Another poet who had some fine offerings to make was our own Laureate, John Masefield, mentioned before. But in the years that followed the First World War it was only his prose work *Melloney Holtspur* that reached the West End for a few special performances in a Basil Dean season at St. Martin's. Masefield had his own private theatre at Boar's Hill, and there, those who were privileged to see, could judge the quality of this poet's dramatic verse in *The Trial of Jesus*, and *A King's Daughter*. In the twenties there was small encouragement for the poet in the theatre, and the fame reached by another poet of the time, John Drinkwater, was due to his prose work in chronicle plays: *Robert E. Lee*, and a play dealing with Oliver Cromwell, not forgetting a comedy which caught the popular fancy, *Bird in Hand*, with its authentic picture of native Gloucestershire in a country inn.

The Group Theatre, founded in 1932 at the Westminster Theatre by some young players who were acting there at the time, set out to present experimental drama, and Stephen Spender and Louis McNiece were among poets who were asked to provide plays for the Group. For the most part scenery and props were dispensed with. The Group Theatre did not survive the 1939 war, but later the Mercury gave some interesting productions of plays by poets, in addition, of course, to T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. *This Way to the Tomb*, by Ronald Duncan and *The Shadow Factory*, by Anne Ridler, will be remembered.

At a time when various elements which were to make the pattern of the modern English theatre were slowly emerging, America gave us some plays which intimated our debt to sources beyond our shores. In 1923 Charles B. Cochran, with the insight that was rarely wrong, discerned the significance of the American dramatist, Eugene O'Neill. He produced *Anna Christie* in the West End, and London recognised a dramatist of rare power. In

him were resident the qualities of poet, artist, philosopher, prophet and dramatist, a fertile combination of creative gifts. His work came to us at a moment when, if we were not yet ready for a revival of poetic drama we were increasingly responsive to the appeal to deeper levels of thought and feeling. There was a growing public no longer regarding the stage as a means of amusement, or as merely a social convention. O'Neill's purpose could be summed up in the words he wrote of one of his own plays: he "digs at the roots of the sickness of to-day . . . the death of an old God, and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one."

He is a master of psychological drama, as can be judged from *Mourning Becomes Electra*, in which the dark passions of the human soul portrayed in ancient Greek tragedy find their counterpart in a family at the time of the American Civil War. The unchanging soul is exposed beneath the changing externals. In *The Emperor Jones* there was the almost terrible monologue about a Negro's flight in the midst of strange forest visions and the incessant beat of tormenting drums,—a peculiarly difficult role for any actor, but carried to success by Paul Robeson (who won wider popularity when he sang "Ol' Man River" in the highly successful Drury Lane musical, *Show Boat*).

Further evidence of the new public in the theatre; with an appetite for something other than the froth and sparkle of light musical comedy, was to be found in the increasing welcome accorded to Tchekov, with a successful revival of *The Cherry Orchard*, at the Lyric, Hammersmith, in 1924. This was a gesture of promise, for within a few years Tchekov was a box office success. The English Theatre was moving! Ibsen, too, had become a classic, a fact which would have startled greatly the playgoers of the late Victorian period. During 1927 the West End received with favour Strindberg's *The Father*, produced by another gifted actor, Robert Loraine, and (most strange of all) coupled at the Savoy, with Barrie's mild item, *Barbara's Wedding*.

The English theatre developed an experimental mood, and gave hospitality to an unusual work by an Italian writer, Luigi Pirandello. One of his plays, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, was staged with limited success (and has since had several revivals), but his strange technique did not win general approval. One of the most remarkable playwrights from abroad was the Czechoslovakian Karel Capek. Here, again, was a social philosopher, using the drama as a medium to challenge and stimulate criticism of some modern collective tendencies. Many will still recall the vivid

fantastic melodrama of R. U. R. (Rossum's Universal Robots) which brought a new word into our current speech. It is the picture of a world overwhelmed by its own mechanical creations; a theme elaborated in fiction by Aldous Huxley's, *Brave New World*. Karel collaborated with his brother, Josef, in the writing of another searching social criticism—the psychological fantasy *The Insect Play*, providing symbols of human types which those who saw it could not forget. Shaw, Galsworthy and Granville-Barker had seemed, at an earlier period, an almost isolated trio of social critics, prophets far in advance of their time. Now, in the names mentioned, we see reflected the acceptance of this critical convention, and the growing challenge and criticism that was to disintegrate so much that had been traditional and conventional in our national life. Of this the modern English theatre had become a mirror.

More plays from overseas were affecting the London theatre in the thirties than at any time during the previous years of the present century. Many came from America—O'Neill has been mentioned already—but much that was American had little importance, and no survival value.

In fairness we should hasten to add that the same was true of much English work of the time. In addition to O'Neill, two other American playwrights who made their influence felt on the English stage were Elmer Rice, who, with his expressionist work, *The Adding Machine*, proved himself in the line of the Capeks, while with realistic drama he gave the English stage real successes in *Street Scene* and *Judgment Day*. The other American writer was Robert E. Sherwood, whose abilities enabled him to provide either light entertainment or the play with an appeal at a deeper level. London welcomed his version of Deval's *Tovarich*, and *Idiot's Delight*, staged two years before the Second World War, proved a work of remarkable foresight in view of subsequent history. There was more American work of value which did not strike root here, one of the most worthy being *The Masque of Kings*, by Maxwell Anderson, which was produced at the Gate Theatre. The Birmingham Repertory, in the early period of the Second War, also staged Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset*, and one may predict that in the future this writer's work will have the reception here which it merits.

The most significant feature of the English theatre after the First World War was the recovery of Shakespeare—not yet in the West End, but south of the river. Here, in the Waterloo Road, the Old Vic was adding another distinctive feature to the Romance of the English Theatre, and making an international reputation under the

direction of a very remarkable woman, Lilian Baylis. Benson had carried the Shakespearian torch into the provinces, with its Mecca at Stratford-upon-Avon, as described in previous pages. Lilian Baylis made the work of her life the revival of Shakespeare for London audiences, not very far distant from the site of the Globe Theatre which had been the scene of so much of his labour. Few incidents in the history of the modern English theatre are more inspiring than the Shakespearian work of the Old Vic. In the autumn of the fateful year 1914, undaunted by the new convulsion threatening Europe, in which England had become engulfed, the Old Vic produced eight of Shakespeare's plays, and before the end of the conflict twenty-five of the plays in the First Folio had been given. It was a noble record, and the world had produced nothing better in dramatic achievement. In the summer of 1921 the Old Vic Company received an invitation from the Belgian Government to appear at the Parc Theatre, Brussels. There they presented six plays of Shakespeare which received a merited ovation. Since then the Old Vic has produced all the works of the First Folio of Shakespeare, as well as *Pericles*; a splendid enterprise never before undertaken in any English theatre.

It is interesting to recall that in 1922 a big rebuilding scheme was necessary at the Old Vic and for a while it looked as though this would bring the fine venture to an end, through lack of capital. Then came another touch of romance in the story of theatreland. Sir George Dance, who made a comfortable fortune out of the light musical comedy *A Chinese Honeymoon*, came to the rescue and gave over £20,000 for the required reconstruction of the Old Vic. Once more Lilian Baylis had triumphed and Sir George had earned the gratitude of all lovers of Shakespeare. It was at this time, also, that the Old Vic had the distinction of producing for the first time in England, Ibsen's dramatic poem, *Peer Gynt*, translated by William and Charles Archer, a task which added to the reputation of a fine producer, Robert Atkins. They were years of reward at the Old Vic for the faith, courage and vision shown by Lilian Baylis in building up this remarkable venture. It was fitting that her splendid service to the English theatre should be recognised in 1929 when she was created a Companion of Honour.

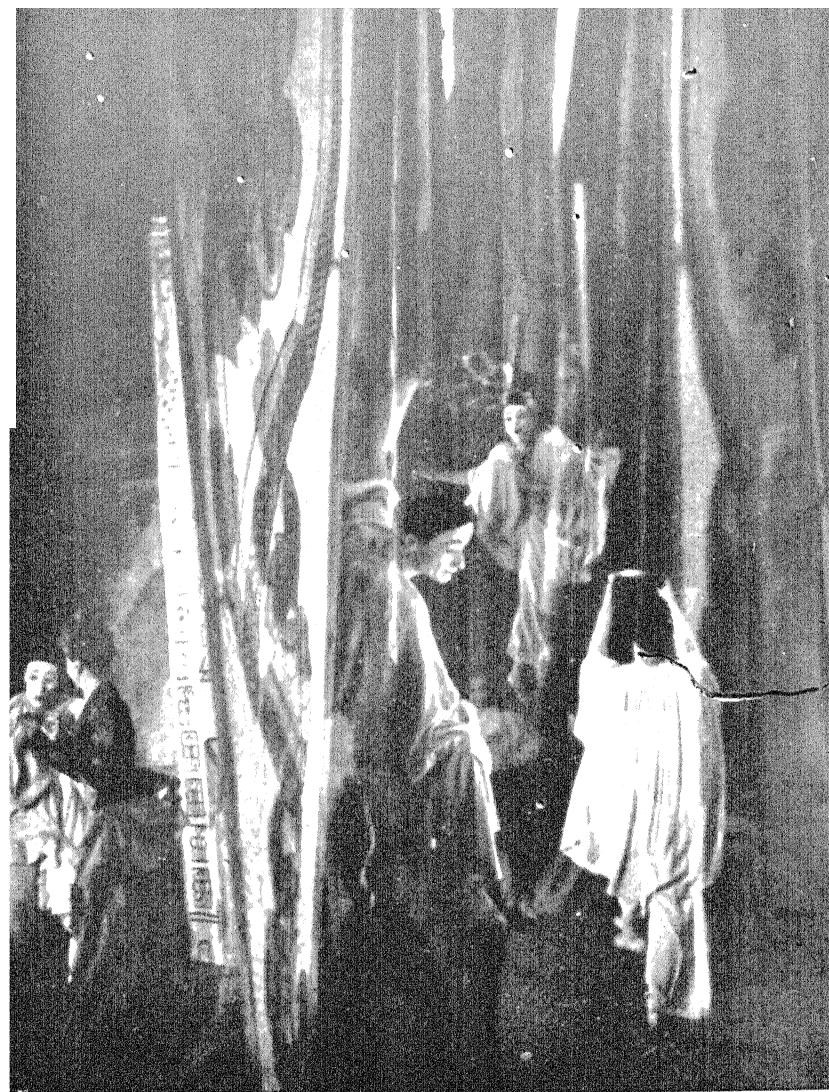
The producer has become increasingly important in the English theatre, and in this category there are names associated with the Old Vic that will endure. One of these is that of Harcourt Williams, who was producing there in the 1930's, and who did much to enhance the reputation of the productions then staged, while more recently

Tyrone Guthrie has brought rich qualities of creative imagination to the task, instances of which visitors to the Edinburgh Festival will also recall.

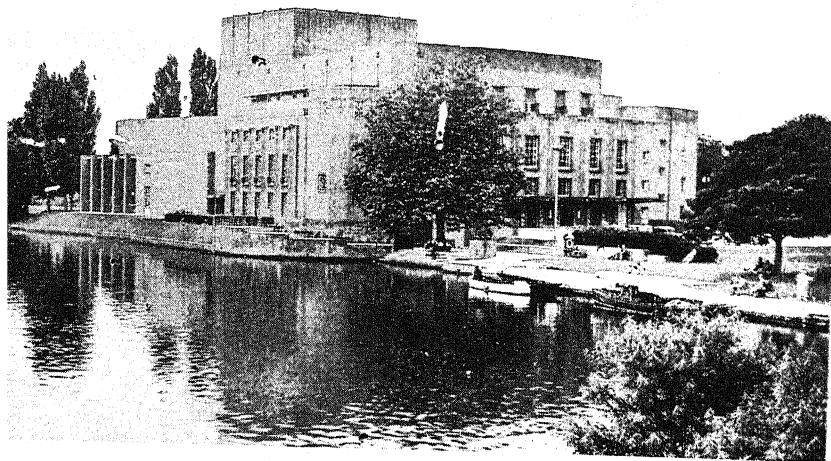
It was to be expected that with such enthusiastic management and talented production the Old Vic should become a famous school of acting and should attract the services of our most gifted players. It is an impressive galaxy, including as it does John Gielgud, Charles Laughton, Flora Robson, Sybil Thorndike, Ursula Jeans, Roger Livesey, Edith Evans, Ernest Milton, Nicholas Hannon, Ralph Richardson and Laurence Olivier, to mention only the most representative. There reputations are still being made, and will be made. As these pages are being written another accomplished performance there has marked Andre Morell as a Shakespearian actor in the great tradition. He has given a profoundly impressive rendering of *Timon of Athens*, one of Shakespeare's most neglected plays.

Lilian Baylis did not restrict her remarkable energies to the Old Vic. Under her control in 1931 the new Sadler's Wells Theatre in Islington was opened, to be the associate and counterpart of the Old Vic on the other side of the river. It is easy to understand how the vivid imagination of Lilian Baylis was fired with the resolve to recreate theatrical life on this historic site. Her idea for the new venture was that opera and Shakespeare should alternate at the two theatres, but speedily the Wells became the centre of opera and ballet, both of which were coming into increasing vogue and attracting larger audiences, while the Old Vic remained a centre of drama, now ranging from the Elizabethans to Tchekov. At the back of the pit in Sadler's Wells it was possible to lift a trap in the floor and behold the spring of clear water still flowing.

As the Romance of the English Theatre unfolds before us in these decades between the two Great Wars, we must note the dramatists who were entering to make a substantial contribution to the expanding theatre of the period. Some come before us whose place is significant, for they enjoyed for a while something like a boom, while others were destined to be of more lasting popularity. Of the former one of the most striking was C. L. Anthony (Dodie Smith). Her own career was something of a romance. After some experience on the stage, in the course of which she wrote her only unsuccessful play, she became buyer for a London furnishing firm. In the course of her duties she visited Leipzig, and then took a holiday in the Tyrol. While there she let her imagination dwell on the theme which is elaborated in *Autumn Crocus*, spending a few hours each



121. JEAN-LOUIS BARRAULT, France's foremost actor, was seen in London in 1951. This photo-montage by Etienne Bertrand Weill was suggested by Barrault's performance in *L'Âme et la Danse* by Paul Valéry.



121. The Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon.

evening in writing the play, then three months in typing a fair copy. It was accepted by the Lyric management, and proved a tremendous success, having had the good fortune to command an able cast, which included Fay Compton, and Francis Lederer, a Czech actor, who knew no English when he came to London to play the part of the innkeeper. The success inaugurated something in the nature of a vogue, and the writer followed it rapidly with further successes: *Service*, staged at Wyndham's in the year after *Autumn Crocus*; *Touch Wood*, at the Haymarket, two years later, and *Call it a Day*, which ran at the Globe for over a year. Then with Dame Marie Tempest and John Gielgud in leading parts, came *Dear Octopus*, which had a long run at the Queen's, terminated only by the outbreak of war in 1939. In six years this dramatist had earned over £60,000 from her plays. She was not to return to the West End with a new play until the autumn of 1952 (*Letter from Paris*).

It is an interesting fact that in addition to their skill as novelists, women have in recent years proved their gifts as playwrights. Clemence Dane has already been mentioned, but others who proved their ability in this field include the Scottish playwright Gordon Daviot (Elizabeth Mackintosh) whose *Richard of Bordeaux* at once achieved fame when produced and played by John Gielgud at the New Theatre. One should add that it brought increased fame to the distinguished actor himself as well, proving one of the outstanding performances of his career.

The novelist, G. B. Stern, was another woman writer who gave a success to the Royalty Theatre in 1929, with *The Matriarch*, in which Stella Patrick Campbell found a congenial role, while another novelist, Margaret Kennedy, dramatised her saga of the Sanger family in *The Constant Nymph*, and *Escape me Never*, which, again, proved victorious for the box office.

Two other dramatists who were to gain an assured place in the theatre of the period were James Bridie and J. B. Priestley—names now familiar to every playgoer. The former was a Glasgow doctor, O. H. Mavor, but who wrote under the name of James Bridie. He did not write his first play until he was forty, and this, at least, he had in common with Bernard Shaw. Again, it was the Birmingham Repertory that gave him to the wider theatre. His first play, *The Switchback* was staged there in 1929. Bridie was a prolific writer and plays came in quick succession. They were distinct in style, rich in satire and humour, and mostly examples of excellent stage-craft. One of the best was an early work, *The Anatomist*, dealing

with the notorious Dr Knox, of Edinburgh, and the famous Burke and Hare murders. *A Sleeping Clergyman* provided both ironical humour and a moving character study, while *Tobias and the Angel* showed what Bridie could do with a quaint narrative taken from the Apocrypha.

Priestley has proved to be one of the most versatile of modern dramatists. That the pen which produced the popular comedy, *Laburnum Grove* could also create *Johnson over Jordan*, was proof of the range and skill of the writer, expressed, too, in the contrast between such plays as the laughable comedy, *When We Are Married*, and the philosophical problem suggested in *Time and the Connways*. Priestley can claim to be one of the enduring playwrights, giving steadily to the theatre both before the last War and since. He has been much influenced by the concept of time elaborated in J. W. Dunne's thought-provoking book, *An Experiment With Time*, and the reflection of it can be detected in more than one play. Many will feel that *Eden End* is one of the best, and the discerning will feel that *Johnson over Jordan* should one day have a successful revival.

J. B. Priestley belongs to the category of author-playwrights, in common with Galsworthy and Arnold Bennett, for it must not be forgotten that his name became familiar first as the author of a very successful and popular novel, *The Good Companions*, subsequently filmed and staged. He is a blend of artist and reformer, and in some respects would bear comparison with Dickens and Galsworthy, or possibly it is more accurate to say that he has characteristics of both allied to a decided originality.

As we group together the modern playwrights we can appreciate clearly the way the theatre more fearlessly appeals to deeper levels of thought than in former days. Granted there is still much that is purely superficial and ephemeral, material for the enjoyment of a pleasant evening, yet there has been, and is, a growing body of material from our more important dramatists that makes the theatre a thoughtful examination of the life of our time, leading to reflection on the more fundamental issues that confront man and society. To sum it up briefly, one may say that the theatre has become more mature and developed. If one compares the English theatre on the eve of the Second World War with what it was at the outbreak of the First Great War of 1914, this change can be measured.

It is when we reach the disaster of the Second World War, and the stresses and tensions it imposed on our national life, that we can see, in the experience of the theatre of the time, how it had gained new life and strength as compared with the days of the earlier conflict.

## Chapter XIV

### PROGRESS IN WAR AND PEACE

THIS new life and strength in the English theatre had been marked by a steady progress in the last decade that not even the upheaval of the Second World War could check. Those who are old enough to do so can contrast the position during, and after the First Conflict with the position as it can be reviewed over recent years. It is this contrast which justifies optimism for the future.

Many wondered in September 1939 what would be the effect on the theatre of the new international disaster. London streets were plunged at once into complete darkness. There was general apprehension of air raids. It seemed naturally a risky enterprise to traverse dark streets and then sit in the narrow confines of a theatre. Yet within three weeks there was evidence of a resolve by the theatres to resume activity. Revue at the Windmill, strange to say, was the first to resume, followed by another non-stop revue at the Little Theatre, headed by Hermione Baddeley, which lasted from 1.15 p.m. until 6. Strange hours became one of the new adaptations of playgoers during the war. Then came the formation of "ENSA" (Entertainments National Service Association) intended to provide interest for the forces at home and abroad, with Seymour Hicks as controller, and Basil Dean as director of entertainments.

It became increasingly clear that there was now existing a theatrical vitality not to be quenched even by the risk of bombs. Comedy promptly resumed at the Victoria Palace with *Me and My Girl*, and at the neighbouring theatre, the Westminster, a success of the Malvern Festival in the previous year was staged: Priestley's *Music at Night*. For the first Christmas of the war the activities of the theatres were as great as they had been in the previous year, and it began to be obvious that while new plays would be scarce there would be an ample supply of revivals. Interruption came with the heavy bombings that marked the end of the 1940 summer, which had been a prosperous one for the theatres. Then for nearly a month the only production in the West End was Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* (a heartening title for the occasion) a comedy that

had not been staged in Central London since 1811. Outside the guns boomed, but the audience enjoyed the play.

Donald Wolfit, who had already made his mark as a worthy successor of Benson in Shakespearian acting and production (in 1937 he had formed his own company) met the challenge of war conditions with a novel and worthy venture. It was the provision, with entrance at a shilling, of lunch-hour Shakespearian recitals at the Strand Theatre, which earned the grateful response of large numbers of city workers. There was also lunch-time ballet at the Arts. It was a time of suspense, but again, and quickly, the theatres rallied, and there was no further gap all through the war years, although some familiar theatres were destroyed, including the Shaftesbury, the Little (which had so bravely met the challenge of the opening days), the Queen's and the Old Vic. Very soon as the theatres made their plans and adjustments, a host of revivals appeared. There was some new work which enjoyed outstanding success. Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit* had nearly two thousand performances. Terence Rattigan provided another of his successful plays, *While the Sun Shines*, which ran for over thirteen hundred performances. This young playwright had already taken a leading place. Before the war, and while he was still in his twenties, he had written a winner, *French Without Tears*, which ran for two and a half years at the Criterion, and earned for the writer £23,000. Two further plays came from this author during the war years: *Flare Path* and *Love in Idleness*.

An American writer, Joseph Kesselring, added to the war time successes with *Arsenic and Old Lace*, which ran for over eleven hundred performances at the Strand, while Esther McCracken's light comedy *Quiet Week-End* ran it close with over a thousand. Noel Coward continued to keep up the national spirits with *Present Laughter*, in 1943, and *The Happy Breed*, in the same year. There could be no complaint about the morale of the English theatre. When someone suggested to Dame Lilian Braithwaite, who was playing a lead in *Arsenic and Old Lace* during the heavy bombings of 1940, that the play should go on tour (to safer areas, one assumes) she replied, "Very well, and we will open at Dover." The reply was typical of the way the theatre carried through those grim days and nights. The wartime intimate revues at the Ambassadors, culminating in the *Sweet and Low* series, were the rage of the Town, and established Hermione Gingold as our most devastatingly witty revue artiste.

The established playwrights did not fail their audiences.

Priestley and Bridie added further to their reputation. The former kept his faith and vision in two prophetic works, *Desert Highway*, and *They Came To a City*, in which he helped his audiences to look beyond the horror of the present. Bridie indulged his pungent humour in *Mr. Boffy*, assisted to the full by the accomplished rendering which Alastair Sim, who was associated with so many Bridie plays, gave to the part of the Scottish clergyman, while in *It Depends What You Mean*, Bridie wrote a satirical parody of the Brains Trust.

Emlyn Williams gave the London stage three excellent plays during the war period. *The Wind of Heaven*, with its strange apocalyptic theme full of Celtic fervour; *The Morning Star*, topically located in bombed Chelsea, and *The Druid's Rest*, a delightful Welsh farce. It was a period when some excellent American work was coming to our shores, and there was more to follow. From this source came a play which left a deep impression on those who saw it; *Thunder Rock*, by Robert Ardrey. It had a poor reception on Broadway, but although it did not have a long run in London it was appreciated by both audiences and critics.

The remarkable fact was that as the war went on, far from any decline the English theatre, particularly in the Metropolis, waxed more strong. There was great acting, and it was possible to see who were emerging as the real leaders of the English stage. In the front rank was John Gielgud, who before the war had revealed his gifts in seasons at the Old Vic. His Lear and Prospero in the 1939 season will not be forgotten. In the last year of the war the Old Vic company which had been stationed in the provinces came to the New Theatre, while John Gielgud had a company at the Haymarket. Between them they provided the public with productions of Shakespeare, Shaw, Ibsen, Tchekov, Congreve, Webster and Somerset Maugham.

Another sign of the times was the formation of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts. It began with grants from the Pilgrim Trust, but in 1946 was granted a Royal Charter, and an annual subsidy from the Treasury. C.E.M.A. (now the Arts Council) spread out to bring the theatre to scores of centres in the provinces where no drama had been known for many years, if at all. In all its manifold aspects the English theatre was showing confidence and faith.

While Gielgud at the Haymarket was giving delighted audiences a repertory that ranged from Somerset Maugham's *The Circle* to Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, great things were happening at the New,

in St. Martin's Lane. Here, for three seasons, Laurence Olivier, Ralph Richardson, and John Burrell were directing the Old Vic company, opening the first season with *Peer Gynt*, staged by Tyrone Guthrie. With Sybil Thorndike, Joyce Redman, Margaret Leighton and others, there were productions and performances which will long be remembered. One of the most distinguished performances in these seasons was the Falstaff of Ralph Richardson, while Laurence Olivier rose to the heights he now occupies.

At last the war ended, and now at this distance of time we can view in perspective the outcome of the vitality and promise we have seen in the English theatre of those exacting years of strain.

One young playwright had appeared during the war whose three plays had given rise to great expectation for the future. In his early twenties, Peter Ustinov had already given us (in 1942) *House of Regrets*, followed in the next year with *Blow Your Own Trumpet*, and then, only a year later, *The Banbury Nose*, followed by *The Indifferent Shepherd*. Gifted, also, as actor and producer, he directed and played a leading role in Eric Linklater's *Love in Albania* at the St. James's in 1949, and two years later his most brilliant play, *The Love of Four Colonels*, was staged.

The established writers have continued to hold their place with fresh offerings. Priestley has done more good work, and Bridie left us the legacy of some further good plays, including his brilliant *Daphne Laureola*, before his lamented death.

Terence Rattigan, already a leading playwright, went on to further successes with *The Winslow Boy* (1946) and *Who is Sylvia?* (1950) while his latest play, *The Deep Blue Sea* (1952), will be regarded by many as his best. There was also his *Adventure Story* in 1949, an ambitious work about Alexander the Great, which deserved greater success, and which demonstrated Mr. Rattigan's capacity for seriousness in the theatre, so brilliantly repeated in a very different kind of play: *The Deep Blue Sea*. Terence Rattigan's work matures with the years, and at just turned forty, his supremacy as dramatic craftsman is unquestioned.

Another playwright entering the front rank is William Douglas Home, whose output is also marked by a versatile command of themes light and grave. He is the author of the moving prison drama *Now Barabbas . . .*, and we find him following this with two gay pieces: *The Chiltern Hundreds* and *Master of Arts*, (plenty of certain laughs in both) and then with an admirable Scottish chronicle play, *The Thistle and the Rose*. W. Chetham Strode is another playwright who, in recent years, has dealt with serious topical

themes, his first success being *The Guinea Pig*, while R. F. Delderfield, Vernon Sylvaine, Roger McDougall, Arthur Macrae, Ronald Jeans and Philip King have been among the popular writers of comedy.

One of the historic events since the last war has been the opening once more of the Old Vic Theatre, on 14th November, 1950. After the severe damage in the war it has been restored with taste and care, and with a new apron stage, but the old chandelier remains to remind old stalwarts of a shabbier but none the less glorious past. The traditions made world famous by the work of Lilian Baylis had not been broken by the interruption of the war. In fact the period at the New Theatre, with casts of outstanding talent, probably resulted in introducing the remarkable work of the Old Vic to a wider public. The first season at the restored Old Vic Theatre opened with *Twelfth Night*, and provided Peggy Ashcroft with an opportunity for creating with her charm and personality a delightful Viola.

Since the return to the Waterloo Road there have been some unhappy differences among the directors, and consequent changes, but Tyrone Guthrie, who had charge following Lilian Baylis's death, returned for the 1951-52 season. There have been serious criticisms, not all justified, of recent performances at the Vic, but none could deny the magnificence of Guthrie's production of the little-known *Timon of Athens*, and particularly of *Tamburlaine*, in which Donald Wolfit made a great personal success, before unfortunate disagreement took him from the company.

It is the proud boast of our native theatre that it has a brilliant coterie of talented actors and actresses, and in the post-war period they have added yet more lustre to their names. Dame Sybil Thorndike continues to adorn whatever part she takes, and since the war she has made a deep impression in *The Linden Tree*; in *The Foolish Gentlewoman*, and most unforgettably as Aunt Anna Rose, a rare comedy creation in the delightful Irish revel, *Treasure Hunt*. Most recently she has scored a triumph in the role of Mrs. Whyte, in the Haymarket success, *Waters of the Moon*, an able psychological study of character, rather in the Tchekovian tradition, by N. C. Hunter. It is safe to affirm that Dame Sybil's post-war work will rank as some of the best in her distinguished career.

Dame Edith Evans is another of our stars who has sustained in these latter years the power and versatility that have always impressed her audiences. Again she has demonstrated this range of power in a wide variety of roles. Whether in *The Way of the World*, or in the pathos of *The Cherry Orchard*, or in the very different character of

Lady Pitts in Bridie's *Daphne Laureola*, or now (opposite Dame Sybil) in *Waters of the Moon*, as the key character, Helen Lancaster, the same sure command is evident.

Flora Robson is another who has traversed further peaks in the post war years. None who saw it will forget the skill with which she carried to success Lesley Storm's play, *Black Chiffon*, or earlier, the resolute energy and unexpected sense of comedy of her portrayal of Lady Cicely Waynflete in *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*. Peggy Ashcroft has consolidated an already assured distinction by a series of noteworthy performances. Her Titania, in Gielgud's revival of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is one we shall recall with a thrill of pleasure. Then there was her moving performance in *Edward, My Son*, and her superb skill in *The Heiress*, with a final curtain not easily forgotten, and again the very different role of Mistress Page in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Now she has crowned all with the depth of her portrayal of the unhappy would-be suicide Hester, in Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea*. Vivien Leigh, Diana Wynyard, Margaret Leighton, Pamela Brown, Joyce Redman, Diana Churchill and Mary Morris, are but a few of our actresses who are also distinguishing themselves at the present time.

The same impressive ability confronts us in our great leading actors. It will be conceded by most that John Gielgud and Laurence Olivier occupy the twin pinnacles of fame in our contemporary theatre.

John Gielgud's distinguished career is well-known to lovers of the theatre. He is a Terry, with all that implies, and his contribution to the stage of his time is immeasurable. From his early days at the Old Vic he has brought a new distinction to the work of the actor and the producer. It was he who first fostered the idea of repertory in the West End, and it was he who brought about a new appreciation of Shakespeare in London's commercial theatres. Of later years he has proved himself as great in comedy parts (witness *The Lady's Not for Burning* and *Much Ado*) as in his famous tragic roles such as *Hamlet*, *Lear* and *Macbeth*, and above all, he has encouraged a team spirit in his productions which has repaid a thousand times in artistic results.

Sir Laurence Olivier's whole career is an inspiring record of success, beginning with leading parts for the Birmingham Repertory Company (with visits to London) before he was of age, while nearly twenty years ago London was made aware of his talent, especially at the New Theatre in 1935, when with John Gielgud he alternated the roles of Romeo and Mercutio, and it was at the same theatre

nearly ten years later that he achieved the pinnacle of his success in the memorable seasons of the Old Vic Company. During the three seasons he was co-director of the company he justified his popularity with masterly performances as Richard III, Hotspur, Justice Shallow and Oedipus, among others. Following his entry into the management of St. James's Theatre he chose for the opening production *Venus Observed*, a new play by the gifted writer, Christopher Fry, whose *The Lady's Not for Burning* had already proved a popular West End success. In *Venus Observed* (which he has also recently produced on Broadway) Sir Laurence played the role of the Duke of Altair, surprising his fans with his clever portrayal of an ageing philosopher.

By a stroke of genius Sir Laurence chose for his 1951 season of plays at the St. James's, Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* and Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*. These brilliant productions were undoubtedly the highlight of Festival Year, and in them both he and his gifted wife, Vivien Leigh, scored heavily, both here and more recently in New York.

(Vivien Leigh had already given the outstanding performance of her career when in 1949 she played the part of Blanche Du Bois, in the widely discussed play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, by the American writer Tennessee Williams. Since she made her first big success on the stage in *The Mask of Virtue* in 1935, Miss Leigh has gone forward to her present assured place and fame. Many will recall her success in another clever American play, *The Skin of our Teeth*, by Thornton Wilder, in which she appeared at the Phoenix in the last year of the war).

Alec Guinness is another leading player who holds a unique place, for in addition to his brilliant work on the stage he has, in the creative sense, contributed more to British films than any other actor.

A performance by Mr. Guinness is always interesting, and his gift for character portrayal excels. The film *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (in which he played eight contrasted roles, one a woman) revealed this, as has his success on the stage in 1952 in *Under the Sycamore Tree*, in which, as the Ant Scientist, he presents a variety of amusing human types. His portrayal of an old man particularly astonished with its veracity.

Such versatility perhaps has its drawbacks in an age of "fan worship," but there could never be a question of type-casting Alec Guinness—surely the sign of a great actor.

In the 1938 Old Vic season, when only twenty-four, he appeared

in the title role of the not-easily-forgotten modern-dress *Hamlet*. In 1951, at the New, he gave another brilliant performance as the Prince in the short-lived, ill-fated Festival of Britain revival.

Ralph Richardson, Michael Redgrave, John Mills, John Clements, Anthony Quayle, Donald Wolfit, Alec Clunes, Emlyn Williams, Godfrey Tearle and Eric Portman are but a few of many leading actors who are adding to the glory of the English Theatre, with such younger men as Paul Scofield, Michael Gough, Denholm Elliott, Richard Burton and Peter Finch pointing to the future.

It is interesting to record that the theatrical profession has been awarded some sixty knighthoods since the days of Sir Henry Irving. Our contemporary actor-knights are Sir Lewis Casson, Sir Cedric Hardwicke, Sir Barry Jackson, Sir Laurence Olivier, Sir Ralph Richardson and Sir Godfrey Tearle. There have been some ten Dames created, including at present Dame Edith Evans, Dame Sybil Thorndike and, in the ballet world, Dame Adeline Genée and Dame Ninette de Valois. The O.M. has been bestowed upon T. S. Eliot and John Masefield among living playwrights.

#### BALLET AND OPERA

There could be no more astonishing story than the rise of native ballet in this country. Who would have dreamed some twenty-five years ago that in 1950 an English ballet company and its ballerina would be hailed in America as the greatest in the world! The idea would have seemed preposterous.

After the death of Diaghileff and Pavlova (in 1929 and 1931) it seemed as though ballet in England must suffer an eclipse. But seeds had already been sown by the group of enthusiasts known as the Camargo Society (to which the late J. M. Keynes and his wife, Lopokova, gave magnificent support). The great ballerina, Adeline Genée, played her part in the founding of the Royal Academy of Dancing, while Marie Rambert's fruitful pioneer work for English ballet needs no introduction. In 1952 the name of Ninette de Valois stands pre-eminent, for it is to her drive and courage that the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company owes its phenomenal rise to world fame, since those early days in the thirties when they were an exceedingly young and inexperienced company at the Wells. On the way have arisen choreographers such as Ninette de Valois herself, Frederick Ashton, Robert Helpmann and John Cranko, and such brilliant dancers as Margot Fonteyn,<sup>1</sup> Moira Shearer, Beryl Grey, Michael Somes and Alexander Grant.

<sup>1</sup>See *Fonteyn—Impressions of a Ballerina* by William Chappell (Rockliff) 1951

With this great development a new audience has been created for ballet in this country, and sufficient enthusiastic balletomanes now exist to support a number of other companies. In addition to the Sadler's Wells Company at Covent Garden and the clever second company at Sadler's Wells Theatre, Ballet Rambert, Festival Ballet and International Ballet have a large following throughout the country.

Fashions in opera going have also changed since the days before the war. The Opera House, Covent Garden, and Sadler's Wells Theatre are now both homes of opera sung in English by permanent companies, though foreign artistes regularly sing leading roles at Covent Garden, where productions are on a most lavish scale.

### THE LITTLE THEATRES

Tribute must be paid to the service rendered to the post-war theatre in London by the smaller, outlying, or non-commercial theatres and private drama clubs, the little theatres as they have been called, or, most aptly by Norman Marshall, the "other theatre." This, of course, was not purely a post-war activity, and one recalls the importance of such theatres as the Gate and the Everyman, Hampstead, in pre-war years.

In addition to the Lyric, Hammersmith, which has already been described (where the Company of Four now operate), there are the New Lindsey, the Mercury (where Ashley Dukes has done much pioneer work), the Watergate, Chepstow and Gateway Theatres, the New Boltons, Embassy and Q. Nor must we forget the truly romantic adventure of the Open Air Theatre in Regent's Park, where, with a fine insouciance regarding our climate, Robert Atkins provides Shakespeare for the delight of thousands.

More particularly, too, must we regard the invaluable contribution made to the interests of our national theatre by the vitally important work of the Arts Theatre, undoubtedly our leading "little theatre," which is under the management of a highly accomplished actor, Alec Clunes. Under his skilful direction the Arts Theatre Club has been built up into a prosperous concern with a membership of more than twenty-five thousand (from an initial 200!), and a list of over 130 plays already to its credit. It is evidence of Mr. Clunes' wise judgment and discernment that during the ten years of his management (I write in 1952) at least 14 plays have found their way into larger West End theatres after being launched successfully at the Arts.

In our contemplation of romantic developments in English

drama, we may note at the dawn of this second Elizabethan era one feature that links it with the first. This is the growing popularity of the poet-playwright, and the increasing welcome given to verse-drama.<sup>22</sup> Nothing has been more remarkable than the extraordinary welcome given by vast numbers of playgoers at the turn of the half-century to the productions of T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry. The former is, of course, by no means new to the theatre. Well before the war, *Murder in the Cathedral* had proved a noteworthy success. Staged first at the Canterbury Festival it had gone later to Ashley Dukes' Mercury Theatre.

The story of its progress is significant. In June 1935 at Canterbury no theatre magnates were to be seen around the city, no West End managers had come to see a work by one of the leading poets of his generation. One well-known critic avoided seeing it at all as he felt sure it would bore him. Arrangements were made for its staging in the Chapter House by Martin Browne, who was the director, and by Robert Speaight, who had been one of the Old Vic Hamlets; both men being in close intellectual and spiritual sympathy with the playwright's mind. The outcome was sure, and *The Times* hailed it as "the one great play by a contemporary dramatist to be seen in England." The play at the Mercury had a run of 225 performances, and it was soon obvious that it appealed to a mixed, and in some ways, contrasted public. Following the Mercury staging the play ran at the Duchess for a further four months, and after that came a tour of English and Scottish cities, where theatres were again crowded. There was a further tour of the play in the autumn of 1937, and a revival at the Mercury in the first year of the war. It was only the war that prevented the play being staged in other European centres.

But the point that it is important to grasp is emphasised even more clearly by the most recent work by this poet-playwright. In the summer of 1949 Martin Browne produced at the Edinburgh Festival *The Cocktail Party*. It divided opinion. It was praised and condemned. Its poetic form is subdued, almost disguised, but the lines have a metronomic beat, and the poetic structure is beyond doubt, most obvious when the work is read. After Edinburgh the play was then taken to New York before London. It triumphed there, and finally London endorsed the victory through the summer days of 1950 at the New Theatre.

Both these successes of Mr. Eliot's demonstrated that there is a growing audience for the poetry of drama. Stephen Phillips was in advance of his time; the magic of Yeats caught but the chosen few,

James Elroy Flecker found success in spectacle rather than in verse while Masefield and Drinkwater, fine poets though they were, fell back on the medium of prose for their plays. Now at last one feels a change has come, and in this respect, most convincing of all is the meteoric rise of Christopher Fry. There is no doubt here. Where Eliot insinuates his verse forms, Fry flaunts ~~it~~ without hesitation or fear, and the welcome is certain. Fry has affirmed on more than one occasion that the spirit of renaissance was already there waiting for him. If this is true then we are, indeed, at the dawn of a strong reaction from the clippéd, bare, almost mutilated language of not a few of the plays in popular vogue between the wars. It is good to reflect how John Gielgud has added further to the many splendid services he has rendered the stage by the inspiration he gave to young Christopher Fry, who has revealed that he began writing plays when only fifteen, but that the impulse forsook him until he heard Gielgud's magnificent rendering of the prison speech in *Richard II* in 1939, when the urge to write was rekindled, with the result we now see. There is in all his work a recovery of the Elizabethan glory in words; words for their own sake; words that sparkle and gleam like gems that the writer loves to turn over so that they may flash and glow. One is caught and held in the witchery and spell of sheer word magic. Recall such lines as those in *Thor*, *With Angels*, which gave a double welcome, to St. Augustine, as he arrives in Britain, and to the spring:

“ Primrose and violet  
And all frail privileges of the early ground  
Gather like pilgrims in the aisles of the sun.  
A ship in full foliage rides in  
Over the February foam, and rests  
Upon Britain.”

Listen, again, to some of the lines in *Venus Observed*, which, as we noted, Sir Laurence Olivier selected for the opening of his actor-managership at St. James's in 1950. They have a truly Shakespearian glow:

“ If you could have seen in your embryonic eye  
The realm of bryony, sloes, rose-hips,  
And a hedge's ruin, a golden desuetude,  
A countryside like a drowned angel  
Lying in shallow water, every thorn  
Tendering a tear. Think, Reedbeck,  
Think of the wonder of such glimmering woe;

How in a field of milk-white haze the lost  
 Apollo glows and wanders towards noon,  
 The wind-blown webs are brighter,  
 The rolling apples warmer than the sun."

Sometimes there is intense economy of words to crystallise and suggest a tremendous thought that can more than fill the mind. Thus *Thor, With Angels* in its climax presents a picture of a Jutish chieftain returning home to find his British Christian slave crucified. When the body is taken down, Cymen kneels with the confessor :

" Briton, boy,  
 Your God is here, waiting in this land again . . .  
 Give us courage to exist in God."

As one glances at the plays there is such a wealth of verbal gems, of sensitive, delicate imagery, that one is tempted to go on quoting. One more example must suffice. It is from *The Lady's Not For Burning*, and is uttered by the girl, Alizon, near the opening of the play. The lines were beautifully spoken by Daphne Slater at the Arts :

" Coming in from the light, I am all out at the eyes  
 Such white doves were paddling in the sunshine  
 And the trees were as bright as a shower of broken glass:  
 Out there in the sparkling air, the sun and the rain  
 Clash together like the cymbals clashing  
 When David did his dance. I've an April blindness."

Let no one imagine that Christopher Fry is content to weave magical words at the expense of plot, or with any weakness of structure. *The Firstborn*, recently staged at the Winter Garden, is an excellent example of the tremendous dramatic impact the author can produce, and the play of words takes nothing from the movement and humour of *A Phoenix Too Frequent*.

Another tendency we should remember is stressed by a recent play by Christopher Fry, *A Sleep of Prisoners*. This was written specially for performances in churches, and is in line with the increasing practice of linking drama with the Church. During the Festival of Britain Year, for example, *Everyman*, an early morality play was presented in the Festival Church, adjacent to the Festival site on the South Bank, while Milton's *Samson Agonistes* was presented at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and Southwark Cathedral was chosen for the presentation of a modern morality called *Your Trumpets, Angels*. There are potentialities here capable of expansion in the future.

## The Epilogue

THUS we end our story most appropriately at the dawn of the second Elizabethan age, full of confidence in the future of the English Theatre, and, in our review of the last fifty years, having endeavoured to indicate only general trends in broad outline, for many excellent works on this period by present day authorities (in which space has allowed of more detailed accounts of movements and personalities) are available for students of drama.

The English stage stands high, if not pre-eminent, among the theatres of the world. We have the foremost actors, producers (whose function has become increasingly important) and stage designers. Such names as John Gielgud, the Oliviers, Edith Evans, Sybil Thorndike, Tyrone Guthrie and Oliver Messel are names to conjure with. We also greet the new age claiming for ourselves Christopher Fry, the most significant new dramatist and a true Elizabethan, and Benjamin Britten, the most significant composer of modern opera.<sup>1</sup>

This vast industry which is the theatre, with all its ramifications, has developed in this country in a spirit of typical British compromise. We have State-aided opera and ballet, State-aided drama under the auspices of the Arts Council, but no State control. We have commercialism side by side with non-profit-making drama; the vast repertory movement; the Festivals, and unique personal achievements such as John Christie's Glyndebourne Opera. Perhaps it was the theatre's special Festival of Britain effort in 1951 which most completely brought home to us the greatness of our stage in all its aspects, and gave us a new awareness of its virility and promise for the future.

If we can take individual dramatists as significant of their own country's current philosophy, it is most interesting to compare the work of Tennessee Williams (America) and Jean Anouilh (France) on the one hand, and Christopher Fry on the other. The plays of Tennessee Williams and Anouilh have aroused great interest over here. They are master craftsmen of the theatre, and it is doubtful if among our modern playwrights we can match their skill. But who would not prefer the philosophy of Fry—the true spirit of

<sup>1</sup>See *Benjamin Britten—A Commentary on his Works* Edited by Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller. (Rockliff) 1952.

renaissance—to the despairing note of the American and the cynicism of Anouilh. Theirs is the backward look.

Is it too much to hope that the English theatre may yet be in the vanguard of a new world renaissance? Christopher Fry has said :

If the theatre is alive it is because it belongs to the life outside its doors. We know what the world looks like and what the action of men looks like in every-day newspaper terms. The knowledge makes for dismay and a suffocation of the spirit. If the theatre can help us to see ourselves and the world freshly, as though we had not rounded the corner into life, it will be what entertainment should be, a holiday which sets us up to continue living at the top of our bent.

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